

**VISIONARY PREACHING:  
EMPOWERING PEOPLE AND CONGREGATIONS  
TO PURSUE GOD'S BETTER FUTURE**

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## **DEDICATION**

To my parents,

Fort and Barbara Wilkerson

From whom I first heard the words of Life,

To the people of two great churches,

Shelter Rock Church, Manhasset, NY and Grace Chapel, Lexington, MA

Who helped me grow into the person and preacher God called me to be,

To my children,

Kelly, Brendan, Mark, and Daniel,

For allowing me to share in the stories of their lives,

To my wife,

Karen Ann,

Who opened the eyes of my heart to a love I could never have imagined.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this project is to provide pastors and leaders with a fresh, biblical, and practical model for preaching that inspires and equips people to pursue God's grand vision for their lives, their churches, and the world.

The project opens with a call for preaching that settles for nothing less than transformation in the lives of its hearers. Visionary preaching is defined, and then distinguished from more traditional approaches to preaching. A survey of the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation establishes the biblical foundations of visionary preaching, followed by a theological and psychological case for its transformative impact.

Having established its validity and advantages, the four basic elements of visionary preaching are discussed in turn; word, image, story, and the person of the preacher. Each of these elements are explained and illustrated with biblical content and examples from classic and contemporary sermons. A simple and practical methodology for each element is explained and illustrated, enabling the reader to incorporate the elements of visionary preaching into their speaking ministry.

Finally, the model is applied to the weekly task of preaching for spiritual formation and mission advancement. Challenges to the visionary preaching model are also raised and addressed. The model is illustrated with transcripts of two visionary sermons.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### “OPEN THE EYES OF MY HEART”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama,...little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>1</sup>

### **Seeing a New and Better Day**

In the sweltering summer of 1963, America teetered on the brink of racial war. The governors of Alabama and Mississippi had blocked the entrances to their state universities, preventing black students from registering for classes. When black

Americans took to the streets of Birmingham to protest peacefully the denial of their rights, the police turned guard dogs and fire hoses on them. Some black citizens retaliated with bombs and looting, while many hundreds more went quietly to jail. In June, President Kennedy sent Congress a sweeping civil rights bill that fueled the fires of conflict. Weeks later, Medgar Evers, a black civil rights worker, was murdered on the front porch of his home in Mississippi. Riots broke out throughout the South, and the violence quickly spread to distant cities like Chicago and Los Angeles. In the words of one observer, “The nation...needed a prophet who could help them see through the smoke left by gunpowder and bombs.”<sup>2</sup>

On August 23, 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. stepped to the microphone at the Lincoln Memorial to speak to the largest crowd ever assembled in Washington, D.C. Over two hundred thousand black and white Americans had gathered to mark the centennial of Abraham Lincoln’s signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. King anchored his thoughts in Isaiah’s prophetic promise of a world set right by God’s rule. By the time he was done speaking, a mere twenty minutes later, people began to believe that our nation would find its way out of the wilderness of racism.

That day, King cast a vision that galvanized the American people, and inspired citizens and lawmakers alike to embrace a better future for our country. It became a turning point in the civil rights movement because, for the first time, the American people were able to see a new and better day; a day when black and white people would sit together at the table of brotherhood, when the sweltering state of Mississippi would be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice, when children of all races would hold

hands on their way to school. Having seen that day, they believed it to be possible and resolved to attain it, no matter how long or hard the struggle.

Such is the power of visionary preaching; preaching that inspires people to pursue a preferable, God-honoring future. While Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech was not delivered from a pulpit on a Sunday morning, his vivid, passionate exposition of Isaiah's eschatological vision inspired the millions who heard it, and led to a transformation in people's hearts and in the soul of American society. He helped us to see a better future for our nation, and to pursue it.

### **Eyes of the Heart**

Helping people visualize and embrace better futures for themselves and their churches is a primary task of the contemporary preacher. If our mission is to transform lives by the power of God's Word, it is essential that our listeners be able to see what their lives and churches can look like when the truth of God takes hold. This is what the apostle Paul had in mind when he prayed for the believers in Ephesus, and for us, "that the eyes of your hearts might be enlightened, that you might know the hope to which He has called you...." (Ephesians 1:18) The hope he refers to is nothing less than the fulfillment of our potential as human beings and the people of God. The knowledge he has in mind is not merely an intellectual understanding, but an experiential reality. The enlightened eyes he prays for are the eyes of our imaginations, inspired and sanctified by the Word of God.

Paul understood that if people can see that preferable future with their minds' eyes, they can believe it to be possible. If they can hear from a person who's begun to



experience that future, they can choose it for themselves. If they can feel a passion for that future swelling in their souls, they can rise up and pursue it.

Visionary preaching draws on a variety of elements – word, image, story, and the personality of the speaker – to accomplish its purpose. It goes beyond traditional preaching by enabling people not only to hear, but to see, feel, and even experience what life can be like when it is lived in relationship with God and under His rule.

The thousands gathered at the Lincoln Memorial that day, and the millions who watched and listened via the media, didn't just hear about an integrated society or dream about racial harmony. As King painted pictures and poured out his heart, they experienced it, right there on the Washington mall. His wife, Coretta Scott King reflected later, "At that moment it seemed as if the Kingdom of God appeared...for a moment." History tells us that moment was enough to turn the tide toward reformation of American society.

In his famous essay, *What is the Matter with Preaching?*, Harry Emerson Fosdick pleads for such exposition, as he discusses a message on joy. "But that real sermon must do more than discuss joy – it must produce it. All powerful preaching is creative. It actually brings to pass in the lives of the congregation the thing it talks about."<sup>3</sup>

Such preaching is possible; not just for orators and statesman like Martin Luther King, Jr., but for called men and women who take to the pulpit every week to open God's Word. Such preaching is essential; not just for great crowds on historic occasions; but for congregations of every size, gathered every seven days, to seek God and His will for their lives and churches.

## **A Working Definition**

Visionary preaching is a form of expository preaching that leverages the power of word, image, story, human personality to communicate God's truth with transformational impact. At its core, visionary preaching is expository preaching. That is, it involves the explanation and application of a biblical text. It is not a pep talk, or a motivational speech, or an uplifting homily. It requires a rigorous, thorough, responsible handling of God's Word. Haddon Robinson defines expository preaching as:

the communication of a biblical concept derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.<sup>4</sup>

Visionary preaching requires such an approach in order to identify and exploit the visionary elements in the text and to communicate those elements with biblical and personal integrity. These elements will be identified and developed more fully in the pages to come, but it is important to establish at this point that careful exegesis and disciplined homiletics are essential to the process.

The goal of visionary preaching is nothing less than transformation. Instruction, rebuke, and encouragement are not enough. The effective communication of God's Word has the power to bring about a new reality in the lives of people, communities, and congregations. Traditional approaches to exposition often fail to recognize and leverage the transformational power of the text to inspire and initiate change in the listeners.

The strategy behind visionary preaching is to unleash the visionary elements already present in the text and allow them to awaken people's latent longings to fulfill

their God-given destinies. Every text contains some of these elements. The preacher's task is to identify these elements, develop them textually, and amplify them with homiletical material that connects them to the lives of the listeners.

The first of these five visionary elements are the *words* themselves. The inspired words of Scripture are explosive. The preacher, like a munitions expert, strategically selects the most incendiary words in the text, skillfully sets them in the listener's life-situation, and then detonates them with life-changing impact. The preacher also uses his or her own words to bring such clarity to biblical truths that people begin to visualize those truths becoming a reality in their experience.

The second of the visionary elements are *images*. Almost every passage of Scripture contains visual elements in the form of metaphors, similes, word-pictures, active verbs, and physical descriptions. The visionary preacher learns to spot those images and enlarge them on the canvas of the listeners' minds. These images have iconic value in the sense that they linger in the mind, radiating spiritual truth in ways words cannot.

Thirdly, visionary preaching capitalizes on the power of *stories* to win people's hearts as well as their minds, and to create psychological energy that propels people forward. Leveraging the power of story involves developing story lines already present in the text, introducing stories into the message as supportive material, and crafting the message itself in a narrative format.

Finally, visionary preaching requires the *person* of the preacher to be fully engaged in the living and communicating of his or her message, so that it is a genuine expression of the speaker's own faith and life. Phillips Brooks' description of preaching

as “truth through personality” suggests that the message must be a genuine expression of the speaker’s own life and faith.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it requires that the speaker establish a relationship with the audience through which that message can be communicated. When the speaker shares her own struggles or victories, and expresses her emotions appropriately and genuinely, it not only makes the message believable, but accessible to the listener’s experience, as well.

### **Beyond the Tried-and-True**

Before exploring the theory and practice of visionary preaching more fully, it might be helpful to consider its distinctive elements alongside some of the tried-and-true approaches to the exposition of God’s Word. While each of these has its place in the preacher’s portfolio, without the visionary element they fall short of the transformational impact latent in every passage of Scripture. Let’s survey some of these traditional approaches, and consider how each might shape a sermon on the subject of giving, drawn from the familiar stewardship text in Malachi 3:8-10:

“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’”

“In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse – the whole nation of you – because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,” says the Lord

Almighty. “Then all nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty.

#### Informational Preaching: “Learn Something”

Some preaching is *informational* in its tone, content, and purpose. Its goal is to instruct; to provide people with information from the Bible that will help them to understand God and His will more accurately and completely. The guiding assumption is that as people gain such an understanding, they will think and live more biblically. Informational preaching is characterized by explanation of concepts, definition of terms, analysis of the text, and illustrations that clarify meaning. The informational sermon is didactic in tone, and is peppered with words like, “know,” “understand,” “believe,” and “affirm.” The informational preacher wants listeners to understand what’s right and true, in order that they might use that information to grow in faith and practice.

An informational expositor will approach the Malachi text by explaining the giving practices in ancient Judaism, defining “tithes” and “offerings” and detailing the subtle differences between them. She will likely clarify Malachi’s reference to “testing” the Lord, pointing out when and how it might be appropriate to test God. The method assumes that when listeners understand God’s expectations in the area of giving, they will adjust their giving patterns accordingly.

#### Exhortational Preaching: “Do Something”

Some preaching is exhortational; it urges people to respond to Biblical truth by doing something. The underlying premise is that it’s not enough for people to understand biblical principles, they need to be reminded of them and challenged to put those truths into practice. Exhortational preaching is characterized by an emphasis on application of

Biblical truth, by appeals for response, and by examples of the truths and principles being put into practice. The frequent use of words like “should,” “must,” “ought,” and “need” brings a sense of urgency to the text and the message. The exhortational preacher wants the listeners to remember what’s important, in order that they might get out there and do it.

In approaching Malachi’s text, the exhortational preacher will focus on the imperatives in the passage – “*bring* the whole tithe” and “*test* me in this.” He will urge the congregation to step out in faith and obedience, perhaps by reminding people of the bold ministry initiatives the church has undertaken. He might challenge the listeners to “try” tithing for the next 3 months.

#### Prophetic Preaching: “Stop Something”

Some preaching is *prophetic* in tone and content. The goal is correction in that it seeks to warn people to stop doing or believing something that is hindering their spiritual growth and witness. The prophetic sermon rebukes bad behavior, critiques the culture of the church or society, and warns about the consequences of continued error and/or apathy. It is often confrontational in tone. It plays out the negative elements in a text, and uses words like, “don’t,” “avoid,” “beware,” and “stop.” The confrontational preacher wants people to recognize what’s wrong with their thinking and living, in order that they might address some sin or deficiency.

A pastor employing the prophetic approach will take hold of phrases like “robbing God” and “under a curse” and emphasize their negative aspects and outcomes. With furrowed brow he will tell the story of Israel’s failure to heed Malachi’s warning, and the judgment that fell on the nation as a result. The message will be amped up with statistics

revealing the stingy giving patterns of American believers, and with grim predictions of under-funded programs and under-supported missionaries.

#### Therapeutic Preaching: “Feel Something”

Some preaching is *therapeutic* in tone and intention; its purpose is to offer healing and comfort to the soul or community in distress. The therapeutic preacher will invite the listener to “receive” or “accept” the truths found in the text, and will speak such truths to the listeners with compassion and warmth. Narrative elements with emotional warmth are used to validate and alleviate the listener’s struggles. The mood is pastoral, offering the listeners what’s helpful in overcoming their difficulties.

The therapeutic sermon will affirm Israel for asking, “How are we to return?” which gives us permission to confess our stewardship failures. The preacher will identify our anxieties surrounding money and giving, and will assure listeners of the blessings that flow to those who trust God with their finances.

These traditional approaches to preaching are valid, effective, and appropriate. Elements of each will rightly find their way into a sermon on the subject of giving. But each of them and all of them fail to capture and capitalize on the inspirational power of the text to lead listeners into new and better experiences in giving.

#### Visionary Preaching: “Become Something”

Visionary preaching is *inspirational* in tone, content, and purpose. The goal is to help people visualize a biblical truth so clearly and compellingly that they’re motivated to seek its fulfillment in their experience. The visionary preacher brings God’s Word to life with such vividness and immediacy that the listener not only sees what the future might look like, but embraces that future and begins moving toward it. The tone of a visionary

message is positive and expectant, employing phrases like, “Imagine...,” and “Picture yourself...,” and “Wouldn’t it be great...,” The listeners begin to aspire to what’s possible, with God’s help.

In a message on stewardship, the visionary preacher will draw upon the rich imagery of Malachi’s text, contained in phrases like “return to me,” and “robbing God,” and “throwing open the floodgates of heaven.” Word pictures and illustrations will enable the listener to see these realities with the mind’s eye. The speaker will tap into people’s genuine desire to return to God, and will highlight the striking contrast between the guilt associated with robbing God and the goodness that flows when the floodgates of heaven are thrown open. In addition to explaining the metrics of tithing, the preacher will describe the psychological freedom found in giving away a significant percentage of one’s income, and the peace that comes with trusting one’s future to a God whose storehouses are overflowing with blessing. A pastor might invite the congregation to imagine the numbers of people who could be reached with a generous missions offering or with sacrificial commitments to a building campaign. Well-told stories from the life of the preacher or other individuals will not only illustrate the blessings of stewardship, but help the listener to believe that such generosity and blessing is available to them, as well.

After a message like that, who would want to settle for miserly giving when the future is so bright and promising for those who are generous? By identifying and developing the visionary elements in the text, the preacher has not only explained the practice of tithing, but has inspired the listeners to embrace that practice, and to take steps toward implementing it in their lives.



More than ever before, pastors are being called upon to provide visionary leadership for their congregations. It's not enough simply to teach the Scripture and shepherd people through the experiences of life and faith. Pastors are expected to inspire and mobilize people to pursue great things for God, both individually and congregationally.

The approach to preaching presented in this thesis will equip pastors and church leaders to tap into the visionary elements present in every biblical text, and connect them to the God-given longings within the heart of every person and church.

Chapters 2 and 3 will establish the biblical, theological, and psychological foundations for visionary preaching.

In chapters 4-7, each of the elements of visionary preaching will be explained and applied to the construction of a message.

Chapter 8 will consider the application of these principles to both congregational leadership and the spiritual formation of Christ-followers, and will identify and respond to the challenges and questions raised by a visionary approach to preaching.

The appendices will provide samples of two visionary messages.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> James Melvin Washington, I Have A Dream: Words and Speeches that Changed the World (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) 104-5.

<sup>2</sup> Washington, 101.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, “What’s The Matter With Preaching?” Harry Emerson Fosdick’s Art of Preaching: An Anthology, ed. Lionel Crocker, (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1971) 29.

<sup>4</sup> Haddon Robinson, Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 21.

<sup>5</sup> Phillips Brooks, Eight Lectures on Preaching (London: S.P.C.K., 1959) 8.

## CHAPTER 2: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

### “THE VISIONARY SCRIPTURES”

#### **Preaching Lite?**

Contemporary preaching has often come under fire for a lack of substance and depth. The values of cultural relevance and seeker-sensitivity, it is said, have weakened the commitment to rigorous exegesis and responsible exposition. Instead of communicating the profound and sometimes disturbing truths of Scripture, too many preachers offer crowd-pleasing stories, media-driven gimmicks, and upbeat homilies.

A recent vacation visit to a church validated some of those fears. The introduction to the message involved a 3-minute clip from the film *Rocky*, a 30-second Pepsi commercial, and a series of descriptive references to a variety of other films and TV shows. A parade of slides announced the main points of the message, each one offering well-intentioned word-play that, unfortunately, obscured the simple structure of the narrative passage. The biblical content of the sermon was seasoned with a string of internet stories that got some laughs but had no logical connection to the message, and with a musical clip that interrupted the message every time a particular word was used. It was all very clever and contemporary, but left us with little time or focus to explore one of the most profound and intriguing stories of the Old Testament. We were sent off with the vague notion that we should more like the biblical hero, but without any scriptural principles to help us do that.

Word pictures, pithy phrases, well-told stories, and human interest could sound like so much “ear candy,” as opposed to the meat-and-potatoes of God’s Word explained and applied. Scott Gibson sounds the alarm that in many churches “sermons have

become anti-dotes to bruised egos, lists of how-to's, and topical discussions on any number of themes – but not biblically centered expositions.”<sup>1</sup>

Can a steady diet of visionary preaching nourish and sustain people spiritually? Is it simply pop-psychology and self-help sermonizing baptized in Bible verses? What biblical precedent and theological grounding is there for such an approach to communicating God's truth?

In this chapter we will explore the biblical foundations for visionary preaching. First, we will discover that this approach is thoroughly biblical. Not only does it require responsible exegesis and exposition, as discussed in the previous chapter, but a survey of the Bible reveals that the essential elements of visionary preaching are found throughout Scripture, from the opening verses of Genesis to the closing chapters of Revelation. Secondly, we will discover that visionary preaching derives its credibility and power from the transformational nature of God's revealed Word.

### **In The Beginning**

The Bible begins with a visionary account of creation. The opening words, “In the beginning...,” draw us into a story; quickly setting up conflict between the formless force of darkness and the hovering Spirit of God. The narrative unfolds day-by-day, as God gradually and deliberately imposes order and fullness where there was once chaos and a great void. There is a sense of movement and progression to the account, culminating in the climactic moment when human beings are created. While there is an abundance of factual content, the reader/listener is swept along by the narrative structure of the account – waiting to see what will happen next. There are no didactic explanations of the divine nature; no exhortations to godliness. At the same time, we are awed by the

wisdom, power, and intentionality of this Creator God. We yearn to know more about Him, and to find our place in this story He has set in motion.

Throughout the creation story, carefully chosen words and skillfully crafted phrases bring clarity to the structure and substance of the account. Repeated phrases like, “Let there be...,” and, “There was evening and there was morning...,” help us appreciate the intelligent ordering of creation and the Creator’s authority over time, space, and matter. The slight alteration of the phrase in 1:26, “Let *us* make...” signal the reader that something special is about to happen; something consistent with all that has happened already, but even more significant and remarkable. These phrases not only communicate, they linger, inspiring confidence and awe in the God we have encountered. One carefully chosen word – “good” – sums up and ties together everything God has done, bathing the entire account in a positive light.

Visual elements abound in the account. We see the plants and trees, the greater and lesser lights in the sky. The newly-formed earth comes to life as the water teems with living creatures, birds fly across the sky, and creatures move along the ground.

There is a sense of emotional movement to the passage, as well, from the unsettling chaos of the opening to the ordered goodness of the final verse, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning – the sixth day” (Genesis 1:31). Our heartbeat quickens with the creative activity of the first six days, and we share God’s sense of rest and satisfaction when all is completed. God freely shares His delight in all that he has made, and His special joy in the creation of beings in His image. This self-revealing Creator doesn’t keep His distance, but is passionately and personally invested in the process from beginning to end.

Note the visionary nature of God’s message to the man and woman. The Lord paints a picture of an earth abounding with life and beauty and provision, and then entrusts that earth to their care. He predicts a positive future for the couple – descendants and dominion – fully expecting them to live up to their high calling and potential. Adam and Eve are not presented with a tedious “to-do” list, nor a catalog of forbidden things. Instead, they are invited to enter into the fullness and fruitfulness of God’s grand purposes. Having shown them how to work and rest, He empowers them to increase, subdue, and manage the world He has brought into being. Rob Bell captures the wonder of this partnership with God:

And so [Adam and Eve] are placed in the midst of this dynamic, changing, alive, vibrant environment and charged with the divine responsibility of doing something with it. Creating, arranging, ordering, caring for – doing something with it. <sup>2</sup>

All the elements of visionary preaching – image, word, story, and personal engagement – are employed by God Himself, in His interactions with human beings and His first communication of Himself.

### **A High Calling**

Many of these elements surface again in the call of Abram, recorded in Genesis 12 and 15. God is asking Abram to do a dangerous and difficult thing – to leave the security of his land, his people, and his father’s household and head out into the great unknown. Instead of simply issuing the command and demanding obedience, God vividly describes the future that awaits Abram and his descendants:

“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples of the earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12.2-3).

Later on the Lord makes the promise even more vivid by inviting Abram to “look up at the heavens and count the stars, if indeed you can count them,” promising that his descendants will likewise be too numerous to count (Genesis 15:5). The words “bless” and “blessing” are carefully and intentionally chosen and repeated to express the desirability of the future God is preparing for Abram and his descendants.

With words and images like these, God taps into Abram’s inner longings for a name and a legacy. In his literary exposition of Genesis, Paul Borgman exposes this human drive for significance and its centrality to God’s call on Abram’s life: “From the very start, God has promised Abram a life and a name. His offspring will become a great nation.”<sup>3</sup> God offers Abram the opportunity for nothing less than personal fulfillment, familial security, and global impact. Not surprisingly, Abram responds to this call with faith and obedience. How can he refuse a future so bright and a God who is willing to trust him with such a high calling? The invitation is so compelling that Abram leaves his father’s house and homeland and sets off on a lifelong pursuit of God and His blessing. “And all the while, God and Abram are working on a divine human partnership in which God *challenges Abram toward a more generous way of envisioning the world and living in it.*”<sup>4</sup>

Similar elements are evident in the call of Moses, recorded in Exodus 3. When God wants to get Moses’ attention after 40 years of silence, He creates a visual image so

stunning that Moses can't help but stop and listen – a bush that blazes but is not consumed. The Lord identifies Himself repeatedly as, “The God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” assuring Moses that the One who called the nation into existence has not forgotten or abandoned them. He has not only heard their cries and felt their misery, He is prepared to enter into their experience bringing power and justice. The vivid imagery of a “land flowing with milk and honey” captures Moses' imagination, as it will the collective imagination of the Hebrews when Moses shares it with them.

When Moses hesitates to accept the mantle of leadership, the Lord doesn't simply pull rank and demand obedience. (At least, not right away!?) Instead, the Lord promises His empowering presence, and predicts success for the reluctant leader: “*When* you have brought the people out of Egypt,” and “The elders of Israel *will* listen to you,” and “after that, he *will* let you go.” The Lord even describes in vivid detail the plundering of the Egyptians as the Hebrews make their way to freedom. Once again, a leader is raised up in response to a compelling vision, vividly communicated by a God who is willing to enter into the task.

So it is that the creative, elective, and redemptive purposes of God are set in motion by a vision-casting God who inspires people to seek and fulfill their highest potential in dynamic relationship with Himself.

### **A Better Future**

Much later in Israel's history, when it is again time to rouse them to belief and action, the prophets draw upon these same visionary elements to effect change in the hearts and minds of the people. The prophets are masters at painting pictures of



preferable futures for the nation. Isaiah, for instance, describes what it will look like when Israel returns to the Lord in wholehearted worship and obedience:

The nations will see your vindication,

and all kings your glory;

You will be called by a new name

that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.

You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord's hand,

a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

No longer will they call you Deserted,

or name your land Desolate.

But you will be called Hepzibah,

and your land Beulah;

For the Lord will take delight in you,

and your land will be married...

As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,

so will your God rejoice over you. (Isaiah 62:2-5)

Notice that Isaiah doesn't just promise a new name, he *announces* the new name beforehand, in order that the people might aspire to it. Instead of simply declaring the Lord's delight in His people, Isaiah evokes the delight of a bridegroom on his wedding day; a delight the listeners not only understand but can actually feel welling up inside them.

In a similar way, Ezekiel envisions revival with unforgettable images: a shepherd gathering his scattered flock (Ezekiel 34), dry bones coming to life across a desert valley (Ezekiel 37), and a heart of flesh replacing a heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:26).

The prophets are just as adept at crafting phrases that not only communicate clearly God's will for the people, but linger in the minds of listeners and give birth to actions. Amos, for instance, invites the people three times in chapter 5 to "seek God and live:"

Seek me and live;

do not seek Bethel...

Seek the Lord and live,

Or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire....

Seek good, not evil, that you may live.

Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you (Amos 5:4, 6, 14).

In a similar way, Micah's closing question reverberates in our souls, inviting us not only to ponder God's grace, but to respond with wholehearted repentance: "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance?" (Micah 7:18). Likewise, Joel's graphic plea to "Rend your heart and not your garments" could not easily be forgotten or ignored (Joel 2:13).

The prophets frequently turn to storytelling to win the faith and obedience of the people, often living out the stories themselves. The narrative passages in Daniel – describing his refusal to eat the royal food of Babylon, and the willingness of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to brave the fiery furnace – not only instruct but inspire God's people to remain true even in pagan and hostile environments. When God wants to

express His faithful, forgiving love, He draws us into a love story, commanding the prophet Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman, and to remain faithful and forgiving toward her even after she is unfaithful to him. When He wants to reveal His abounding grace toward all people, God gives us the story of a runaway prophet named Jonah. Jonah's reluctance to preach to his enemies deftly exposes the narrowness of Israel's vision and her lack of compassion for people God loves. These prophets are not merely teachers, speaking to the people from the safety of the sanctuary. They enter into the realities of the people they serve, sharing their struggles, wrestling with their questions, and modeling the faith and obedience that God desires.

The Old Testament closes with a graphic portrayal of judgment on God's enemies and the promise of a bright and new day for God's people. "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves" (Malachi 4:2). We feel the warmth of the sun, and smile at the prospect of kicking up our heels with new-found strength and delight. The clear, compelling image of a better future creates a sense of anticipation in the hearts of God's people, and a desire to prepare for and embrace that future when the Lord brings it to pass.

### **The Ultimate Visionary**

Jesus is the consummate visionary preacher. Certainly, his teaching ministry included instruction, exhortation, healing, and even rebuke. But the overwhelming tone and content of Jesus' preaching is inspirational – casting images of a preferable future for those who will choose to follow and serve Him. We need look no further than the

Sermon on the Mount to find all the elements of visionary preaching effectively employed.

The Sermon opens with a series of Beatitudes – carefully chosen words and skillfully crafted phrases that invite listeners into a state of being they would never have dared to imagine for themselves:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart  
for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers  
for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3-12).

The word “blessed” is central again, as it was in Genesis, rich with positive mood and meaning, referring to “the highest type of well-being available to human beings.”<sup>5</sup>

It's nine-fold repetition in the forward position of each phrase ensures that it will stick in the mind and memory of the listener. The juxtaposition of such positive possibilities with the bleak realities of the hearers' experiences couldn't fail to win their attention, and the future Jesus offered them – attaining the kingdom of heaven, inheriting the earth, becoming children of God – couldn't fail to capture their imagination. This is no health-and-wealth gospel, to be sure, but Jesus clearly announces that their future with God is brighter and better.

As the Sermon unfolds, Jesus will continue to use carefully crafted words and phrases to clarify his message and impress it upon his hearers:

“You have heard that it was said....But I tell you....”

“Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

“You cannot serve both God and Money.”

“Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 5:21-7:12).

Throughout the sermon, Jesus employs visual elements that enable listeners to see, not just hear, the truths He is proclaiming. Metaphors abound, e.g., the salt of the earth, the light of the world, treasure in heaven, the narrow gate. Instead of simply telling people how to behave, Jesus describes in vivid detail what it looks like when people put into practice the things he is teaching. We watch as a worshiper leaves his gift at the altar and goes to reconcile with a brother. We imagine how radical it would be to turn the other cheek to someone who slapped us, and how liberating it would be to be free from worry, like the birds of the air and the flowers of the field. We can see the glistening skin of the fasting brother who puts oil on his face, and we imagine the intimacy of a secret place to commune with our Father. These new commands don't feel burdensome to us.

On the contrary, we find ourselves longing for these kinds of experiences, and eager for the first opportunity to put them into practice.

Even though we can't actually hear Jesus preach the message, there is a sense of emotional movement to the sermon. In the beginning of the message we are engaged intellectually by the provocative sayings and fresh approach to the Law. Moving into the body of the message, we become more personally involved as Jesus taps into our everyday experiences and addresses our fears and failures. There are a few moments of comic relief – a plank-eyed brother and pigs with pearls. But the mood intensifies as we contemplate the possibility of choosing the wrong gate, or being shut out of heaven. The listener can't help but swallow hard and think twice about the enormity and urgency of the decision that needs to be made.

When it comes time to wrap up the message, Jesus doesn't harangue the listeners with "shoulds" and "oughts," nor does he resort to emotional pleas for compliance. Instead, he tells a simple, well-crafted story of two men building houses on very different foundations. We see the rain, we feel the wind, and we hear the great crash of the house built on sand. What listener in her right mind wouldn't choose to build her life on the rock-solid foundation of Jesus' words?

Dallas Willard captures well Jesus' effective use of visual imagery, everyday stories, and emotional connection to his listener's lives:

The secret of the great teacher is to speak words, to foster experiences, that impact the active flow of the hearer's life. That is what Jesus did by the way he taught. He tied his teachings to concrete events that make up the hearers lives....By showing to others the presence of the kingdom in the concrete details of our

shared existence, we impact the lives and hearts of our hearers, not just their heads. And they won't have to write it down to hold onto it.<sup>6</sup>

At a certain point Jesus stopped speaking, but the “preaching” continued as he lived out the life he had expounded. He would *be* poor in spirit and persecuted for righteousness sake. He would turn the other cheek, love his enemies, and pray to His Father in secret. He would become the gate that leads to life. It was this consistency between his teaching and living that gave Jesus such credibility when he spoke. He was, as John proclaimed, the Word made flesh, living among us (John 1:14-18).

These visionary elements – image, word, story, and authentic living – would characterize Jesus' entire preaching ministry. No wonder the crowds marveled at his teaching, and the authority of His message (Matthew 7:28-29). Those who listened to him preach didn't just hear of the glory of God, they beheld it, and were changed by the experience. Such is the power of visionary preaching.

### **Written on Human Hearts**

The epistles, by their nature and purpose, tend to be more informational and exhortational in tone and content. They are written documents rather than verbal messages, and usually address a variety of specific issues in didactic fashion. Still, visionary elements surface regularly to bring vividness, vitality, and impact to the teaching.

When Paul wants to persuade his readers that they are justified by faith, he not only offers extensive theological explanation and definition in Romans 3, he goes on in Romans 4 to recount the story of Abraham's justification by faith. This not only helps to clarify and illustrate the point, but leverages the familiar and revered narrative of Israel to

win the hearts of his readers. When he wants his readers to understand the connectedness and interdependence of the church, he draws upon the extended metaphor of the human body, inviting the readers to imagine themselves as hands and feet and ears and eyes. Writing to the Colossian believers, he not only reminds them that they have been spiritually “raised with Christ,” he goes on to describe what life on a higher plane looks like in everyday experience – showing compassion and kindness toward one another, forgiving each other’s failures, worshiping together and admonishing one another (Colossians 3:1-17).

In a similar way, the writer to the Hebrews not only defines faith in Hebrews 11, but goes on to recall story after story of people who actually lived by faith, so that we can see what faith looks like, and aspire to it ourselves.

No one uses word pictures better than James. We laugh at ourselves when we realize that reading the Word and ignoring it is like looking in a mirror and failing to wipe the dirt from our face. We’re convicted when he describes the preferential treatment given to a wealthy person who walks into our sanctuary, and we’re sobered by the truth that our lives are as short-lived as the morning mist.

John’s pastoral concern for his readers fairly leaps off the pages of his letters. He doesn’t just tell us to love each other, he loves us with his kind words and gentle tone. Again and again he addresses us as “dear friends” and “dear children.” There is a warmth and affection to his letters that authenticates his teaching, and inspires us to love others in the same way.



## **Imagine This!**

When we arrive at the book of Revelation, we discover that the Bible ends as it began – visually, with a vivid description of life in the new heaven and new earth, and words of invitation to enter into that life in all its fullness. Images abound – the holy city coming down from heaven, jeweled gates, and a river of life flowing down tree-lined streets. We hear hope-filled words that speak to our deepest longings – no more death or mourning or crying or pain. We feel comforted by the promise of God wiping the tears from our eyes. Our imaginations are awakened by the prospect of a city so bright with God’s glory that it needs no lamps; a city so suffused with God’s presence that it needs no temple; a city so safe that its gates need never be shut (Revelation 21-22).

While there are words of warning for those who ignore or reject the invitation, the overall tone of the passage is positive and expectant. The Lord has offered us a vision of the future that is so appealing, so satisfying, and so desirable only a fool would turn it down. Everything that we long for as human beings – beauty, truth, love, safety, significance, and relatedness to God – is ready and waiting for us. All that’s left for us to do is to embrace that future by believing in the One God has sent, and even that is as simple and appealing as drinking the water of life.

## **The Word Implanted**

A visionary approach to preaching is not only modeled throughout Scripture, it also rests upon the transformative power of God’s Word, the Bible. We know that Scripture is “God-breathed and useful” (2 Timothy 3:16), and that “it will accomplish the purpose for which it was given” (Isaiah 55:11). When the apostle Paul reflects on his fruitful ministry among the Thessalonians, he attributes it in large measure to the

proclamation of God's Word, which he ministered clearly, i.e. "with words," passionately, i.e. "with deep conviction," and authentically, i.e. "how we lived among you" (I Thessalonians 1:5). This effective teaching ministry enabled the Thessalonians not just to hear, but to "receive" their message as the "the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (I Thessalonians 2:13). Similarly, James invites his readers to "humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you" (James 1:21).

The visionary preaching model is grounded in God's revelation of Himself in the Scriptures. It is consistent with the communication patterns we find modeled by the prophets, the apostles, and by Jesus Himself. And it is grounded in the transformative nature of God's truth. Visionary preaching leverages that power by communicating God's Word visually, clearly, dramatically, and authentically. It "plants" images in the minds and hearts of listeners that, like seeds, give birth to fruitful, fully-grown followers of Christ.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Scott M. Gibson, Preaching to a Shifting Culture (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004) 220.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 158.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Borgman, Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 140.

<sup>4</sup> Borgman, 56, emphasis added.

<sup>5</sup> Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998) 120.

<sup>6</sup> Willard, 114.

## CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### “THE PEOPLE WE WERE BORN TO BE”

#### The Desire To Rise

In the opening chapters of her book, *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin introduces us to four men vying for the Republican nomination for President of the United States – Edward Bates, William Henry Seward, Salmon Chase, and Abraham Lincoln. These four men came from very different stations in life, displayed remarkably different temperaments, and brought different strengths to the political arena. Yet all four shared a common attribute: ambition. That ambitious spirit was characteristic of the post-Revolutionary times in which they lived, according to Goodwin, who describes them as “members of a restless generation of Americans.”<sup>1</sup> But the visiting French diplomat, Alexis de Tocqueville, saw something more primal and ubiquitous at work in the hearts of these restless Americans. He came to believe that this longing for prominence and achievement was latent in every human heart, waiting only for the conditions that would allow its expression. He observed that whenever people have shaken free of social and political constraints, as these young Americans had, “the idea of progress comes naturally into each man’s mind; the desire to rise swells in every heart at once....Ambition becomes a universal feeling.”<sup>2</sup>

I believe that this “desire to rise” is, in fact, a God-given longing within every person to realize their potential as a human being; to become all that they were created to be. Visionary preaching is effective because it recognizes and taps into this innate and universal longing. It is an approach that is both theologically grounded and psychologically sound.

In this chapter we will explore the theoretical foundations for visionary preaching. First, we will discover that such an approach to preaching is grounded doctrinally in the *imago dei* and in God's ultimate purposes for humankind. Secondly, we will consider the psychological factors that make visionary preaching reasonable and effective.

### **Our True Selves**

Theologically, visionary preaching is grounded in the doctrine of the *imago dei* – the biblical teaching that human beings are created in the image of God. We are designed and destined by God to express something of the character and nature of God – His personhood, His relational capacity, His industry and creativity, His self-awareness and moral freedom. According to Berkhof's classic work, *Systematic Theology*, "The idea is that by creation that which was archetypal in God became ectypal in man. God was the original of which man was made a copy. This means, of course, that man not only bears the image of God, but is His very image."<sup>3</sup>

Inherent within every human being is the capacity to become like God in character. Thus, man was not created in a neutral state, but a positive one, according to Berkhof, tending toward "true knowledge, righteousness and holiness."<sup>4</sup>

That image has been sullied by sin, so that human beings tend to express their personhood and pursue their potential in unhealthy and ungodly ways. However, that divine image still resides within us and yearns for expression, especially after a person has experienced the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ. "These...elements constitute the original righteousness, which was lost by sin, but is regained in Christ."<sup>5</sup> This would suggest that the redeemed person is not only capable of holiness and righteousness, but is in fact disposed to express these positive attributes

when set free to do so. The apostle Paul was speaking to that reality when he reminded his readers and us that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

The *imago dei* means that deep inside, people *want* to glorify God – they want to worship, they want to love their family and their neighbors, they want to be generous, and to make a positive contribution to the world around them. Rob Bell writes, “This is what we are all dying for – something that demands we step up and become better, more focused people. Something that calls out the greatness that we hope is somewhere inside of us.”<sup>6</sup> Evangelism consultant George Hunter speaks about the latent desire of people, both church and unchurch, “to become, in this life, the people we were born to be, conceived to be, and deeply within us have always wanted to be.”<sup>7</sup> Author and psychologist Larry Crabb reminds us that there is something good in every human being that longs to be named and nurtured. That something is “the actual life of God, the energy with which the Father and Son relate to other, a set of inclinations put in our hearts by the Spirit and kept alive by His presence.”<sup>8</sup> Naming and nurturing that “something good” is central to visionary preaching.

### **Beyond Sin Management**

Many traditional approaches to preaching focus on the problem of human sinfulness; instructing and exhorting people in the practice of what Dallas Willard calls, “sin management.”<sup>9</sup> The mood of such messages tends to be negative, cautionary, reactive, and even scolding. The problem with such preaching is that it causes listeners to fixate on their fallenness and failures, setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy that often leads to more and deeper failure.

This negative approach is commonly taken when pastors address the problem of sexual sin. Such sermons typically cite gloomy statistics about how many teenagers are engaging in premarital sex, or how many men are hooked on internet pornography. They tell heartbreaking stories of men and women who have fallen into sexual sin, bringing ruin to their families and to their testimonies. Once the preacher has the congregation's attention, he warns them to "flee sexual sin," lest such disaster should fall on their heads.

Unfortunately, the pastor's statistics have already predicted failure for a large percentage of the listeners, and the vivid tales of immorality become scripts that are not easily forgotten, or resisted. How many teenagers have walked out of sermons like that wondering if maybe there's something wrong with them, since "everyone else in high school is doing it?" How many men have men have consoled themselves with the knowledge that at least they're not the only one with a pornography problem? If so many other believers have tried and failed to overcome sexual sin, what are their chances of finding victory? Obviously, we need to face reality and warn people of danger. But the sheer weight of all the negativity creates a gravitational pull toward the dark side of sexuality. (Not unlike the golfer, who steps up to the tee reminding himself over and over to stay out of the sand trap, with the result that his fixation causes him to hit the ball right into the middle of it!)

In contrast, visionary preaching focuses on the positive potential resident within every person in light of the *imago dei*. It stimulates our noble, God-given longings, and sets our sights on success instead of failure. The visionary preacher will approach the subject of sexuality with the goal of describing sexual purity and fulfillment in such vivid, attractive, and compelling terms that people won't want to settle for anything less.

Instead of simply warning young people of the dangers of premarital sex, the pastor will help them visualize the delightful and satisfying intimacy waiting for them in the safety and abandon of marriage. Instead of scolding men over the dangers of internet pornography, he will help them imagine the liberation from lust they will experience every time they click the “Delete” button on a salacious email or pop-up. Such preaching not only predicts victory, it empowers listeners write a new script for how they will respond in the moment of temptation. It “sets [their] minds on things above...and [their] life now hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:2-3). In fact, visionary preaching makes that “hidden” life visible and accessible through stories, word pictures, and modeling.

To be sure, our fallen nature and tendencies need to be exposed and addressed. But when people are presented with a vision for what their lives can look like under the rule of God, they will be inspired to pursue that preferable future. When someone puts into words the deep longings of their hearts, they will choose to express and follow those longings. When they hear stories of men and women glorifying God and fulfilling their potential, they begin to believe that such fulfillment and significance is possible for them, as well.

### **The Drive To Become**

The universal “desire to rise,” which may be understood as an expression of the *imago dei*, has been observed and affirmed by several leading theories of motivational psychology. Decades ago Abraham Maslow identified a hierarchy of human needs, and demonstrated that once a person’s fundamental needs for sustenance and safety are met, they are free, and even inclined, to satisfy higher level needs for belonging, esteem, and



ultimately self-actualization. In his definitive work on the subject, *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow writes:

A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write if he is to be at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature. This need we may call self-actualization....It refers to a man's desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become...everything that one is capable of becoming.<sup>10</sup>

Maslow is not writing from a Christian perspective; at least, not wittingly. But his findings are consistent with the biblical portrait of human beings. According to the theological formulation of the *imago dei*, human beings have the innate potential to reflect God's attributes of holiness, righteousness, and love. That is their "true nature," to borrow Maslow's expression. While sin has crippled and stifled that nature, the regenerating work of the Spirit frees people once again to give expression to those divine attributes and to pursue their highest potential. The apostle Paul writes, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

In other words, if a musician must make music, and an artist must paint, then a Christian *must* glorify God. Visionary preaching fans into flame this innate, spiritual dynamic; informing people of their God-given potential and inspiring and equipping them to pursue it. It invites them to become the people God created them to be.

More recently, Edward Deci and Richard Ryan of the University of Rochester, identified three kinds of motivation that shape people's behavior. *Extrinsic motivation* is motivation based on rewards or punishment. When an employer announces that salespeople who surpass their quota will win a Caribbean vacation, or, that employees who are late coming to work three times will have their wages docked, the employer is applying extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation can be effective, but usually yields only short term results and generally leads to a decline in employee loyalty and morale.

A second kind of motivation is *amotivation*, which actually stifles people's desire to succeed, or even to try. Amotivation results when unrealistic expectations are placed on a person, or when the task seems meaningless, and without personal or corporate benefit. A piano teacher who continually expects a student to perform pieces beyond his or her ability, or who never provides the student with an opportunity to play for an audience, will likely wind up with a student who doesn't practice, doesn't enjoy the instrument, and eventually drops out.

A third kind of motivation, and the most effective, is *intrinsic motivation*, which the theorists define as "an inherent tendency to seek out novel challenges, to extend one's capacities, to explore, and to learn."<sup>11</sup> Intrinsic motivation prompts a student to do extra reading for an assignment even though she will not get extra credit for it. It inspires a tennis player to seek out a more talented opponent, or a bricklayer to do his best work on a wall that nobody will see. People who are intrinsically motivated typically display higher levels of productivity, creativity, and satisfaction.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the traditional approaches to preaching described earlier often create environments characterized by extrinsic motivation or amotivation. Exhortational

preaching depends on “shoulds” and “oughts” to get people to act like Christians, reminding people of what God or the church expects of them. Confrontational preaching warns people of negative consequences if they don’t behave properly. Informational preaching often ignores the motivational component altogether, and therapeutic preaching can focus so much on a person’s woundedness or brokenness that they are not given the opportunity to see beyond their present reality.

In contrast, visionary preaching awakens a person’s internal, intrinsic desire to grow and to pursue a new challenge or a higher call. It prompts people to pursue spiritual growth and fruitfulness for its own sake, rather than to conform to some external expectations or to avoid some negative consequence. It creates an environment of joy, fulfillment, and excellence within a congregation.

Paul Baard and Chris Aridas have applied the findings of motivational psychology to the ministry of local congregations and parishes. They have found that an intrinsic approach to motivation leads to “more frequent church attendance, higher levels of donations of time and money, and better internalization of Christian values.”<sup>13</sup> While there are many factors that contribute to the creation of an intrinsically motivating environment, none is as significant as the preaching ministry. They write, “The single greatest opportunity any congregation has to meet the innate motivational need to grow, to learn more, is through the weekly sermon or homily.”<sup>14</sup>

Paul Baard was a member of my previous church, and once challenged me to get through a whole sermon without using the words, “should,” “ought,” or “must.” I was surprised at how difficult that was, and realized how dependent most preaching is on those words. I was equally surprised by how refreshing it was to deliver a message

without those words. The message took on an invitational quality that was not only engaging, but compelling. People seemed eager to embrace the ideas I was communicating, and the response seemed, somehow, deeper and more genuine. I repeated the experiment the next Sunday, and never looked back. To this day I rarely use those words in my preaching. When we speak to people's intrinsic longings, we don't need to "should" and "ought" them into responding.

These motivational theories and findings suggest that there is more to preaching than communicating information or prescribing behavior. Preaching, by its style and content, can either stifle or stimulate innate tendencies toward maturity, significance, and self-actualization. Visionary preaching recognizes and leverages these psychological forces to promote spiritual vitality and growth in individuals and congregations.

### **Someday**

Finally, visionary preaching is grounded in God's ultimate purpose for human beings, for the church, and for all of creation. God's vision of the future is positive. God has assured us that one day the heavens and earth will fully and forever display His glory, and that human beings redeemed by His grace will live and reign with Him forever in worlds beyond our imagining. That vision is communicated in both Old and New Testaments through vivid images, unforgettable words, and inspiring stories from a God who is fully engaged with His creation and who takes great delight in His people. God's declared intention is that His people will be "fully conformed to the image of His Son," and His promise is that no power in heaven or on earth or under the earth can thwart that purpose (Romans 8:28-38). God's declared intention for His Church is that it will thrive and grow, even with all the powers of hell arrayed against it (Matthew 16:18). God's

declared intention for creation is that it would be liberated from its fallen condition so that it might fully and forever display the glory of God (Romans 8:19-21).

To be sure, that Day will only be fully realized in God's time and by His power. But Kingdom-life has already broken into our present age, and the blessings of God's rule are now accessible to people through faith in His Son, Jesus. The writers of the New Testament, and Jesus Himself, fully expected people to begin experiencing this new reality as a foretaste of and witness to its ultimate expression. In the same way that Jesus proclaimed the arrival of the Kingdom and invited people to participate in it, visionary preachers encourage seekers and believers to take hold of "real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of." (John 10:10 The Message).

When a preacher stands before people and paints a biblically-informed picture of a better future for their lives and their congregation and their world, she is communicating the very mind and heart and will of God. That future may involve hardship and suffering, to be sure. It may not be the future the listeners are imagining or desiring in their own will and wisdom. But it is a future that is bright with the promise and purpose of God; a future that has been announced, secured, and authenticated by Christ Himself. Such a preacher stands on solid ground theologically, and unleashes the image-bearing, self-actualizing drive that God has placed within every human being.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, Team of Rivals (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005) 28.

<sup>2</sup> Goodwin, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949) 203.

<sup>4</sup> Berkhof, 204.

<sup>5</sup> Berkhof, 203.

<sup>6</sup> Rob Bell, Velvet Elvis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 169.

<sup>7</sup> George Hunter, Church for the Unchurched (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 52.

<sup>8</sup> Larry Crabb, Connecting: A Radical New Vision (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997) 52.

<sup>9</sup> Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998) 141.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham Maslow, Motivation and Personality, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) 46.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, Why We Do What We Do (New York: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> David Myers, Psychology. (New York: Worth Publishing, 1998) 387.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Baard and Chris Aridas, Motivating Your Church (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001) 30.

<sup>14</sup> Baard and Aridas, 41.

## CHAPTER 4: WORD

### *“FIDES EX AUDITU”*

#### **272 Words**

When the smoke cleared after the Battle of Gettysburg, there were no victors, suggests Garry Wills in, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. The Confederate forces had been driven from the field, decimated and demoralized. The Union army had held its ground, but suffered many casualties, and failed to finish off their foe when they had the chance. The generals on both sides, Lee and Meade, offered resignations to their respective Presidents, Davis and Lincoln. Thousands of bodies were strewn across the blood-soaked soil of the Pennsylvania farmland. The horror of it all hovered over the landscape, and caused many to wonder whether any cause was worthy of such loss.

In an attempt to bring some measure of closure and dignity to the scene, a cemetery was commissioned, to be dedicated with “artful words to sweeten the poisoned air.”<sup>1</sup> The leading orator of the day, Edward Everett, was invited to bring the main address. His two-hour oration recounted the details of the battle, honored the valor of the Union soldiers, and affirmed the rightness of their cause. By all accounts, it was a fine speech – appropriate and eloquent – but relatively inconsequential.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, President Lincoln offered three minutes worth of Dedicatory Remarks. He recalled the founding of the nation fourscore and seven years earlier, honored those who had given their lives to preserve that nation, and envisioned for the country a “new birth of freedom” that would extend to all of it’s citizens. When Lincoln was done, he had not only “disinfected” the air and soil of Gettysburg, but had

reframed the war itself, and re-interpreted the Constitution upon which the nation had been founded. In Wills' words:

The crowd departed...from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America. Lincoln had revolutionized the Revolution, giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely.<sup>2</sup>

All that, in just 272 words. Such is the power of words – well-chosen, well-crafted, and well-spoken.

Visionary preachers recognize the power of words to effect change in the lives of people and congregations. Words can do more than inform, rebuke, encourage, and heal. Words, rightly used, can enable people to see a preferable future for their lives, to hear that future calling to them, and to feel the thrill that awaits them when they embrace that future with God's help. Effective preachers will choose their words carefully, paying attention not only to their meaning, but to their sound and style and structure. They will craft those words into cogent and memorable phrases that stick with the listener and conjure up the larger message of the sermon. They will deliver those words with skill and conviction so that they have maximum impact on the listener.

### **God's Words and Ours**

We know that God's words have transforming power. The Lord Himself declares, "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). The declaration informs us that every word God speaks is both purposeful and effectual.



Speaking through Jeremiah, the Lord says, “Is not my word like fire,” declares the Lord, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” (Jeremiah 23:29). Both fire and hammer effect change. Fire can alter the landscape, or drive away darkness. A hammer can shatter an object, or shape it into something useful. So it is with God’s words – they cannot help but change things.

The New Testament confirms the power of God’s words. The writer to the Hebrews tells us:

The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight (Hebrews 4:12).

God’s Word, when properly heard and understood, breaks through our defense mechanisms and exposes our innermost yearnings and failures.

The Bible not only declares the transforming power of God’s words, it demonstrates that power. God’s words brought the universe into existence, and brought order and beauty to the chaos. God’s words prompted Abram to leave home, summoned Moses into leadership, unleashed judgment on the nations, and commissioned prophets to preach. When John the Baptist proclaimed God’s words, they brought some to repentance and provoked others to anger. When Jesus expounded God’s words in Nazareth, some were amazed, while others tried to shove him off a cliff. None were unmoved. And when God invaded human experience with His transforming Presence, it was as the eternal Word, wrapped in flesh.

God's words have transforming power. Having said that, we've all sat through sermons that were anything but transformational. God's words were spoken, but we walked away undisturbed, uninspired, and unchanged. The problem was not with the words themselves, but with the handling of those words. They were not presented in a way that illumined their meaning or unleashed their power. The preacher's words got in the way of God's words – obscuring their meaning, deflecting their impact, and dulling the hearer's perception of their message.

While visiting a church, I heard a message on risk-taking, drawn from the story of Jonathan's assault on the Philistine outpost, recorded in I Samuel 14. The speaker did a commendable job of setting up the text and explaining the action. But somewhere between the explanation of the text and the conclusion of the message, the inspiring, empowering impact of the story was lost. Awkward transitions, strained illustrations, and predictable points stifled the story. At one point, the speaker tried to help us appreciate the superior firepower of the Philistine army compared to that of the Israelites, who were armed with nothing more than farm implements. He said, "It would be like the United States military going against Iraq." The congregation let out an audible, "Huh?", because we were all aware of the difficulty the United States military has had in subduing that much smaller nation. The illustration backfired – diminishing the drama of the story and undermining the speaker's credibility. The Scripture didn't fail us that morning, but the speaker did, by his careless use of words.

God's words have power, but so do ours! In his book, *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker describes the capacity of words "to shape events in each other's brains with exquisite perfection...Simply by making noises with our mouths, we can reliably

cause precise new combinations of ideas to arise in each other's minds."<sup>3</sup>

Communicating ideas – big ideas, God's ideas – is the very essence of the visionary preacher's task. It can't be done without words!

Walter Ong makes clear the connection between word and vision. In *Interfaces of the Word*, he writes, "To become intelligible, what we see has to be mediated, in one way or another, through verbal formulation....For [people] there is no understanding without some involvement in words."<sup>4</sup> . When a pastor is casting vision – whether it's for a building project or an outreach effort or a commitment to daily devotions – he or she wants to employ words to communicate that vision; to describe and define a future state so vividly and precisely that the listeners can actually visualize it. In other words, if you can't *say* it, they can't *see* it.

Words not only have visual power, they have auditory impact, as well. Linguists remind us that language was spoken long before it was written, and that speaking and hearing is "an event in the world of sound through which the mind is enabled to relate actuality to itself."<sup>5</sup> Something happens when words are spoken; the very air vibrates with meaning. Those vibrations are picked up not only in the listener's ear but in the interiority of his soul. As Ong suggests, "spoken words allow us to connect with interiors."<sup>6</sup>

There's an immediacy about speaking and hearing that is absent from writing and reading. A person who reads is processing words that were recorded in another time and place; a time and place that is largely inaccessible to the reader. The reader can't hear the inflection in the speaker's voice, or see the look in the speaker's eye, or feel the mood of the moment or the message. He can start and stop reading at will, lingering over a

sentence to digest it's meaning, or skipping over an entire section to suit his purposes.

The reader experiences the words on his own terms.

But when a word is spoken, both speaker and hearer are thinking the same thing at the same moment in the same setting. There's no escaping the intensity, the volume, or the pitch of the speaker's voice. There's a simultaneity about the experience that intensifies the communication.

Two people were overheard talking about their pastor's recent sermon. One of them had been away for the weekend and missed it. As his friend described the impact of the message, the one who had been away said, "I'm going to have to get the tape." His friend exclaimed, "You can't just get the tape. You had to be there!" "Being there" is what makes the spoken word so powerful.

All this suggests that words are more than a collection of letters that convey meaning, or a burst of sound that stimulate cochlear nerve endings. As Salter puts it, "The distinction between words and deeds is often artificial; words are deeds."<sup>7</sup> That's certainly the sense we get when we read Genesis 1 and discover that God "spoke" the universe into existence. Interestingly, the Hebrew term translated "word," *DABAR*, can also be translated, "event," pointing to its existential dimension.<sup>8</sup>

Something happens when words are spoken, especially when they are skillfully chosen, crafted, and delivered. They become what J. L. Austin refers to as a "performative utterance," that produces change in the lives of the listeners.<sup>9</sup>

## Pay Attention To Words

Since visionary preachers believe that preaching is to be a transformational event they will pay more attention to words, in order to maximize their transformational potential.

First, they will pay more attention to the words of the text. Given God's obvious reverence for words, we must recognize the intentionality of every God-breathed word in Scripture. This is not to suggest a dictation theory of inspiration, but simply to recognize that as the biblical writers carefully chose their words, the Spirit was superintending their selection and arrangement to communicate meaning. Word studies, grammatical analysis, and structural observations are essential steps in unlocking the visionary elements of a text. Wordplay, repetition, chiasm, *hapax legomena*, Old Testament allusions, all suggest strategic word choice on the part of the biblical author.

In preparation for an Advent sermon, I was working out of the opening verses of Isaiah 40; familiar territory for both preachers and hearers. This time around I was struck by the number and variety of references to and variations on the word, "voice:"

*Comfort, comfort* my people,

*Says* your God.

*Speak tenderly* to Jerusalem,

And *proclaim* to her

That her hard service has been completed,

That she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

*A voice* of one *calling*:

"In the wilderness prepare

the way for the Lord;

make straight in the desert a highway for our God....

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,

And all people will see it together,

*For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

*A voice says, “Cry out.*

*And I said, “What shall I cry?”*

“All people are like grass,....

The grass withers and the flowers fall,

but *the word of our God* endures forever.”

*You who bring good news to Zion,*

Go up on a high mountain.

*You who bring good news to Jerusalem,*

*Lift up your voice with a shout,*

*Lift it up*, do not be afraid:

*Say* to the towns of Judah,

“Here is your God!” (Isaiah 40:1-10, emphasis added).

The variety and intensity of references to speaking compelled me to wonder why voices were, and are, so essential in preparing the way for the Messiah’s arrival. Textual study and reflection led to some fresh and intriguing insights, and ultimately to an Advent message entitled, “Finding Your Christmas Voice,” which inspired people to use their own voices for Christmas outreach.

The visionary preacher will not only pay more attention to the words of the text, but also to his own words – choosing, arranging, and delivering them for maximum impact. The mythology surrounding Lincoln’s preparation of the Gettysburg address intimates that he penned the words hastily, on his way to the engagement. Gary Wills argues that “these mythical accounts are badly out of character for Lincoln, who composed his speeches thoughtfully.”<sup>10</sup> In fact, there is evidence that Lincoln was working on his remarks in Washington days before the ceremony, and that he had been in touch with the cemetery landscaper beforehand, in order that he might have proper understanding of the design and the reasoning behind the layout. Salter corroborates Wills’ perspective, noting “Lincoln’s obsession with the right word, and the right word to follow it.”<sup>11</sup> Those 272 words were no accident, but rather the product of thoughtful selection, construction, and delivery.

### **Well-Chosen Words**

Effective use of words begins with selection – choosing the right word. Several fundamental elements of style will help the visionary preacher choose words that not only convey meaning, but facilitate a life-changing, existential encounter with God’s truth.

*Use specific words rather than general terms.* Instead of saying “car,” say “SUV” or “convertible.” Specificity increases both clarity and interest. When the listener hears the word, “child,” a variety of possibilities come to mind. When the listener hears, “toddler” or “3<sup>rd</sup> grader,” he actually pictures a child, most likely a particular child he knows and has feelings for. Now the listener not only understands more accurately, he is visually and emotionally engaged, as well.

*Use concrete words rather than abstract words.* When the preacher asks, “When was the last time you showed love to your neighbors?” the listeners feel guilty, but don’t really know what’s being asked of them. When the preachers asks, “When was the last time you brought a meal to your neighbor, or shoveled their driveway?” the listeners not only understand what’s being asked, they can do something about it.

*Use vivid words rather than dull words.* Instead of saying, “she ran,” say, “she sprinted” or “she jogged.” “Ran” conveys meaning, but the others add mood and movement to the scene. When a speaker says, “the alarm went off,” listeners understand what happened. When a speaker says, “the alarm buzzed,” listeners hear what happened, and are jarred into attentiveness.

*Use a variety of words rather than common words.* Synonyms not only add nuance of meaning, they keep the listener intellectually interested. If you’re working with a story or text involving “fire,” scratch out a word list and work them into the message wherever appropriate: flame, blaze, spark, inferno, smolder, conflagration. The variety of words will engage more of the senses, so the hearers can vicariously enter into the experience being described, and be *affected* by it, not just *informed* by it.

*Use surprising words rather than predictable words.* When words and phrases are predictable, the listener’s minds wander off in search of more interesting material. When words catch them by surprise, they’re rewarded for their attentiveness, and listen more closely so as not to miss the next one. When people drift in and out of a message, they may still *grasp* the message, but probably won’t *experience* the message.

In a sermon published in *Preaching Today Audio*, Mark Buchanan defines agape love as “unprovoked” love.<sup>12</sup> “Unprovoked” is not only a change from the familiar



modifier, “unconditional,” it also causes the listener to stop and think about the implications of a word usually applied to negative emotions like anger or jealousy, now being used to describe love. A sermon series entitled, “Jars of Clay in a Crash-Bang World,” not only avoids the cliché, “rough-and-tumble,” it adds visual and auditory impact. You can see, and even hear, clay pots being knocked around and clanking into one another. People are engaged visually and emotionally, not just intellectually.

### **Well-Crafted Words**

Effective speakers will not only select words carefully, but will then craft them into pithy, memorable phrases. Every pastor who has conducted a Capital Campaign understands the value of a simple, visionary phrase that captures the essence and the urgency of the campaign. He and his team will labor and agonize over the construction of that phrase, and then leverage it throughout the campaign. But when he sits down to work on a sermon, this same pastor will throw together a predictable outline or wordy proposition that nobody could remember even if they wanted to! Visionary preachers recognize the impact and staying-power of a well-crafted phrase, and labor and agonize over its formulation every week.

The crafting of such a phrase is not unlike the crafting of an organizational mission or purpose statement. Common wisdom suggests that such a statement should be about 10 words, have no more than one punctuation mark or connecting word, and be understandable to a 12-year old. In his book, *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson outlines the journey from exegetical idea to homiletical idea.<sup>13</sup> Visionary preachers will take this one step further to express the idea in a memorable and compelling way. J. Kent Edwards refers to this pithy rendering of the homiletical idea as simply, “the preaching

idea.”<sup>14</sup> Wordsmithing such a phrase might involve alliteration, parallelism, the use of a cultural buzzword, or a paraphrase of pop jargon.

Even as I write these words, I can recall such phrases from messages I’ve heard, some of them many years ago. At a summer conference our church heard Walt Kaiser speaking from the book of Daniel. The big idea of his first message was simple, compelling, and unforgettable: “Only God is great.” Years later, I still hear people repeating that phrase and drawing encouragement from it. In a now-classic sermon, Haddon Robinson preaches on temptation from Genesis 3, warning listeners: “Don’t doubt God’s goodness.” Without calling attention to itself, the doubly-alliterated, balanced phrase rolls off the tongue and lodges in the mind. Ever since hearing it, I have found it to be an ever-present help in times of temptation. A generation of church leaders have been inspired by Bill Hybels’ treatment of the parables in Luke 15 and his profoundly obvious observation that, “Lost people matter to God.” These phrases are more than accurate. They’re clear. They’re positive. They elevate our vision and expand the horizons of our faith.

Sometimes such phrases emerge early in the preparations and become the organizing theme of the sermon construction process. Other times, the preacher has to plow ahead with research, outlining, and even writing, waiting for the phrase to reveal itself in an unguarded moment – while mowing the lawn or waking in the middle of the night. However it happens, such a clear and compelling phrase need only be mentioned two or three times in a message for it to have staying power and transformational impact.

## **Well-Spoken Words**

Once words have been selected and crafted, turn them loose! Preaching is not merely verbal communication, it is oral communication. Walter Ong reminds us that “words are primarily spoken things.”<sup>15</sup> The preacher’s words come to life as they are delivered, aloud, in the moment.

As important as the preparation process is, the actual speaking of the words will hinder or heighten their impact. Effective use of the voice involves more than simply increasing the volume to make a point. By lowering the voice, the speaker suggests a more intimate mood, signaling the revelation of something of personal significance. Increasing the rate of speech creates urgency and excitement, while slowing the pace sets up a reflective moment. Without visual cues like commas and paragraph breaks, oral communication requires changes in rate, volume, and intensity to punctuate the message, helping the listener to organize and process the material being presented. We have already noted how skillfully Lincoln chose and crafted those famous 272 words, but Wills points out that the President was also trained in rhetoric and acting, and that he “knew about rhythmic delivery and meaningful inflection.”<sup>16</sup>

Visionary preaching leverages the power of well-delivered words to facilitate a memorable and dynamic encounter with God’s truth. Tony Campolo accomplishes this in his memorable sermon, “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s A’comin,” by drawing upon the cadence and crescendo of Black preachers. That simple refrain, repeated with increasing volume and intensity with each movement of the sermon, creates a sense of gathering momentum and triumph that could never be fully appreciated by a mere reading of a transcript.

Because preaching is primarily an oral rather than written medium, it requires an element of spontaneity and immediacy that cannot be communicated by words on a page. Something is lost when a speaker never strays from her manuscript, or lapses into a wooden delivery of memorized material. In cultures where epic poetry is a primary means of capturing and communicating information, performers are careful not to document or memorize their material, lest it diminish the impact of their presentation. Walter Ong suggests that “for certain uses of language, literacy is not only irrelevant, it is a positive hindrance.”<sup>17</sup>

In the early years of my preaching ministry, before computers were standard operating equipment, I wrote and re-wrote my messages longhand on a yellow legal pad, and then translated the final draft into hand-scrawled notes in preparation for preaching. The result was that I had paragraphs and sentences fully formed in my mind, but I delivered them with the freedom and spontaneity of an extemporaneous message. I was fully engaged with the congregation in the delivery of the message, which had the feel of a lively conversation.

When I made the transition to the computer, I became more of a wordsmith, laboring over word choice and sentence structure, sometimes right up to the final moments of preparation. The result was a word-perfect manuscript, which I then felt obligated to deliver precisely as it was written. Suddenly I was tethered to the pulpit and my notes like never before. I often felt like a scholar presenting a paper, or a budding actor mechanically delivering lines from a script.

I’ve learned now to leave myself time to work with the finished manuscript, marking it up and internalizing the message. During the delivery, I consciously and

deliberately step away from my notes and the lectern, trusting my mind and my mouth to say what needs to be said, the way it needs to be said in that moment, which may not always be the way I wrote it in my study. Frequently now I find the clearest expression of my thought doesn't emerge till I'm actually delivering the message to the congregation.

This skilled spontaneity is especially important for the preacher who needs to deliver the same message three or four or more times in multiple weekend services. I find it helpful to make minor but intentional adjustments to style or content, so that each message is appropriate for a given style of service, time of day, or congregational demographic. For visionary preaching to maximize its effectiveness as an oral medium, both speaker and congregation need to feel as though they are experiencing something transcendent, something unique, that cannot be captured in a manuscript or a recording.

### ***Fides Ex Auditu***

“Faith comes by hearing,” says the apostle Paul. “How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Romans 10:14; 17a).

Many years ago, as a young pastor, I arrived at a pastors' conference weary, beaten up, and feeling woefully inadequate to the task. I shuffled into the opening session and collapsed into my seat, far enough back to distance myself from the eager pastors who rushed toward the front so as not to miss a word from the celebrity speaker. After some singing and words of welcome and introduction, Chuck Swindoll ambled to the microphone, looked us all in the eye, and with the voice of a seasoned shepherd said,

“I’ve come here tonight to encourage you.” Those seven words, and the way that he said them, found their way to my interior, and breathed life into my soul. He went on to speak from 2 Samuel 16, when David was cursed by Shimei and supported by Abishai. It was a helpful message, as I remember it. But it was that that simple phrase – “I’ve come here tonight to encourage you” – that made it worth whatever price I paid to be at that conference. It wouldn’t have been enough to read the manuscript or listen to the tape. I had to be there. I had to be changed.

Such is the power of words – well-chosen, well-crafted, and well-delivered.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Garry Wills, Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America (Touchstone: New York, 1992) 23.
- <sup>2</sup> Wills, 38.
- <sup>3</sup> Steven Pinker, The Language Instinct (New York: HarperCollins, 1994) 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Walter Ong, Interfaces of the Word (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977) 125.
- <sup>5</sup> Walter Ong, The Presence of the Word (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981) 21.
- <sup>6</sup> Ong, 125.
- <sup>7</sup> Darius Salter, “The Impact of Words about God” Preaching, 18.1(2002) 23.
- <sup>8</sup> New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, Vol. 1, Willem A. VanGemeren, Gen. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 912-913.
- <sup>9</sup> J.L. Austin, How To Do Things With Words (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975) 6.
- <sup>10</sup> Wills, 28.
- <sup>11</sup> Salter, 23.
- <sup>12</sup> Mark Buchanan, “Unprovoked Love” Preaching Today Audio Issue 285, CD (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc., 2006).
- <sup>13</sup> Haddon Robinson, Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980) 97-100.
- <sup>14</sup> J. Kent Edwards, Effective First-Person Biblical Preaching (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 67.
- <sup>15</sup> Ong, The Presence of the Word, 1.
- <sup>16</sup> Wills, 20.
- <sup>17</sup> Ong, The Presence of the Word, 25.

## CHAPTER 5: IMAGE

### “BECOMING WHAT WE BEHOLD”

#### **The Inner Game of Preaching**

Back in the 1970's, when the field of sports psychology was just emerging, an innovative coach named W. Timothy Gallwey tried a fresh approach to teaching people to play tennis. Instead of overwhelming novice players with instructions, he simply asked them to watch as he hit ten forehand shots. He didn't want them to *think* about what he was doing or to make mental notes. He simply asked them to watch, allowing their minds to form a visual image of the forehand. Then, placing the racket in the student's hand, he told him to imagine himself hitting the ball the same way, and then give it a try. Consistently, Gallwey found that students who simply watched and imitated what they saw learned far more quickly and easily than students who received lengthy instruction and explanation. Gallwey went on to develop and refine his method, which he eventually wrote up in a now-classic volume entitled, *The Inner Game of Tennis*. The thesis of the book, as the title suggests, is that athletic performance is as much a matter of internal dynamics as external skills. A key component to this “inner game” is the principle of visualization, in which an athlete imagines herself executing a forehand with precision and power. The theory behind visualization is that when an athlete forms vivid, mental images of peak performance, she programs herself to actualize that performance.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of the inner game caught on quickly, finding application not only to other sports, but to other arenas as well – the marketplace, self-improvement, etc. For example, before making a sales call, an executive might imagine herself confidently making her proposal, fielding questions, and then closing the deal. A person on a diet



will visualize himself opening the refrigerator and grabbing a piece of fruit instead of a piece of pie. The success of “the inner game” concept is testimony to the power of mental images in shaping human attitude and behavior. While visualization will certainly not compensate for a lack of basic skills or inadequate preparation, athletes and executives have found that positive mental imagery can lift their performance to new levels of effectiveness and satisfaction.

Proponents of the inner game are tapping into a truth that poets, politicians, and a few savvy preachers have understood for centuries: people become what they behold; we do what we see. Visual images, hung on the walls of a person’s imagination, will shape that person’s attitudes, behavior, and will.

If the goal of visionary preaching is to inspire and equip people to pursue God’s better future for their lives and churches, they must be able to see that future, vividly, with the eyes of their minds. Therefore, the skilled and biblically-grounded use of mental imagery – word pictures, metaphors, illustrations, etc. – is central to the effectiveness of visionary preaching. Additionally, the contemporary preacher will take advantage of physical imagery available through the worship arts – projected images, live painting, sermon props and sets, video, film clips, etc.

While effective preachers have always relied on the power of imagery to communicate their message, the visual culture in which we find ourselves today will demand even greater and more effective use of the visual dimension of preaching. In this chapter we will explore the theoretical and historical foundations of imagery in preaching, the importance of imagery to visionary preaching, and the methodology of using such images effectively.

## Why Are Images So Effective?

The importance of visual images to preaching becomes clear when we understand how central they are to human language, thought, and decision-making.

Language is grounded in imagery. Human beings' earliest attempts at communication involved cave paintings and hieroglyphics. The characters of the Chinese alphabet, and many other alphabets, are visual representations of objects and actions. Even a phonetic language like English draws heavily upon images to lend meaning to words. The American author and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson calls attention to this in his essay, *Nature*, in which he points out how many English words and concepts are drawn from material objects or facts:

Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. *Right* originally means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*; *transgression*, the crossing of a *line*....<sup>2</sup>

Every grammar school student learns early on to use metaphor and simile in her writing. Such figures of speech simply describe one thing in terms of another. Warren Wiersbe unpacks the etymology of the word, *metaphor*, pointing to the Greek root words META, meaning “across” and PHEREIN, meaning “to bring, or carry.” He goes on to describe the use of metaphor as a “verbal transfer,” in which an idea is carried across from one thing to another, even though those two things may seem unrelated.<sup>3</sup> A figure of speech may be used to describe something unfamiliar in terms of something familiar – “heaven is like a home” – or to describe something abstract in terms of something concrete – “love is a rose.”

In our previous chapter, we established the importance of words to visionary preaching. But when we understand and leverage the pictorial foundations of language, its visionary impact is heightened. Word and image become hammer and nail in the hands of the effective preacher.

While we typically think of metaphors as figures of speech to be sprinkled here and there to add flavor to our communications, many would contend that all language, and human thought itself, is grounded in metaphor. In their seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff, a linguist, and Mark Johnson, a philosopher, declare, “We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system...is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, people speak and write visually because they process their experiences and the world visually. For instance, when we’re feeling good or doing well we think in terms of upward movement. We might say that “the coach is *upbeat*,” or, “attendance is *on the rise*,” or, that an ambitious executive is “*climbing the ladder* to success.” As Lakoff and Johnson would put it, we “live by” the metaphor that upward is positive, and downward is negative.

Such visual cues and associations are always running through our minds and shaping our understanding and activity. A person who “sees” life as an adventure will think, feel, and choose differently than a person who “sees” life as a trial. The former will think in terms of possibilities, will feel excited about what’s around the bend, and will seize new opportunities, even when they’re difficult. The latter will think in terms of

difficulty, will feel wary and suspicious, and will endure hardship rather than embracing it.

The visualcy of our brain functioning helps to explain the success of the inner game concept discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The images we project on the walls of our mind not only inform our understanding, they trigger our emotions, govern our behavior, and can even program our bodies to perform in certain ways. Fred Craddock argues that these mental images and life metaphors are so powerful in shaping human behavior, that words and ideas alone are insufficient to effect transformation in their lives. In, *As One Without Authority*, he writes, “images are not replaced by concepts, but by other images, and that quite slowly....not until the old image is replaced is he really a changed man.”<sup>5</sup> This visual dynamic is what makes visionary preaching so effective in producing change in people’s lives.

### **Preaching with Imagination**

In his book, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination*, Warren Wiersbe applies these insights to the work of the preacher. He reminds us that the human mind is a picture gallery, not a lecture hall, and that the images that hang there shape our beliefs, behaviors, and decisions.<sup>6</sup> The preacher who wishes to effect change in the hearts, minds, and behaviors of people will quickly grasp and exploit the visual nature of human thought. Wiersbe describes it as “turning ears into eyes;” that is, providing listeners with imagery that illustrates, illumines, and impresses on the mind the truths we are trying to communicate. He goes on to say, “The bridge between the mind and the will is the imagination, and truth isn’t really learned until it is internalized.”<sup>7</sup>

The traditional modes of preaching discussed earlier, i.e. the transfer of information, exhortation to action, rebuking bad behavior, etc., will not effect change in the listener as deeply or enduringly as a clear and compelling vision of who or what they might become when they embrace a particular truth. That internalized vision, enlivened by the work of the Spirit, becomes transformative in its effect; it can and will produce change in the life of the listener. As Richard Griffin writes, “It’s hard to overstate how important this is, because the conceptual metaphors we use to frame a given situation or task *will determine our decision* about what we ought and will do.”<sup>8</sup>

There are several reasons for the transformative impact of images in preaching. First, when we attach a truth to a mental image, the truth is imprinted on the mind, like a trademark burned into a baseball bat. One of the most elementary techniques of improving short-term memory is to associate words or names with mental images; e.g. “Oscar’s” round face brings to mind the first letter of his name. The next time we see his face, we think, “O” and remember “Oscar.” Since images are recalled more easily and retained longer than mere words or concepts, an idea imprinted on listener’s mind will have a longer life-span in the listener’s memory, and will more readily come to mind at an appropriate moment.

For instance, a pastor challenging his congregation to be more accessible to outsiders might remind his listeners of the many “gated communities” they pass on their way to church. With their guard house and lowered gate, these communities discourage visitors and protect insiders from the wrong kinds of people. When the pastor goes on to suggest that some churches are like “gated communities” that discourage visitors and

preserve an insider culture, the congregation will not only understand more clearly what he means, they will be more likely to remember his point.

Secondly, images invite further reflection on the part of the listener. Once the idea and image are imprinted on the listener's mind, his imagination is able to ponder its possible meanings and implications. Developing the aforementioned illustration, the preacher might ask: "Who are the "guards" that might intimidate newcomers entering the church?" or, "What are some of the "gates" that discourage people from just dropping in?" While some of these angles may be developed by the preacher in the message, it is even more meaningful when listeners have their own "aha" moments while discussing the sermon over lunch, or turning it over in their minds on the Monday commute. The effective use of images by the visionary preacher facilitates these kinds of transformative discoveries.

Thirdly, a truth embedded in the imagination can be brought to remembrance again and again by the right visual cues. When the listener sees that particular image, she will find herself also recalling the spiritual truth attached to it. So, the next time a parishioner goes through the hassle of trying to visit someone who lives in a gated community, she's likely to remember the sermon illustration, and be reminded of how hard it is for people to enter into an unwelcoming church. Like a land mine waiting to be tripped, a potent image embedded in the mind can "explode" when triggered by the visual cue, and work its influence again.

If the goal of visionary preaching is to cast images that compel people to pursue a preferable future, then the more of the sermon they "see," the more compelling it becomes. When we are able to paint pictures in people's minds of what it looks like to

love your neighbor as yourself, or to pray without ceasing, or to glorify God with your body, those images will restructure the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of the listeners' lives. They will not only understand and desire the preferred future, they will begin to pursue that future with greater degrees of confidence and success. Thus, the effective use of visual elements transforms people from the inside out, so that their "inner game" of faith becomes actualized in their experience.

### **A Visual History**

Visual imagery has always been a vital aspect of communicating and experiencing Christian faith. In the early days of the church, when subterranean catacombs served as both sanctuary and cemetery, believers decorated the walls with paintings that told the stories of Scripture and visualized the foundational doctrines of their faith.<sup>9</sup> The Gothic cathedrals served as "the Bible of the poor," enabling illiterate worshipers to grasp the might and grandeur of God in the architecture of the buildings, and to learn the Scripture through stained glass and wood carvings. The proliferation of religious art in the medieval period – frescoes, sculpture, carved pulpits, elaborate crucifixes, painted panels, etc. – prompts one historian to suggest that it "may be the one period in the church's history when the visual dimension dominated the verbal dimension in the communication of faith."<sup>10</sup> Even preaching became more visual in that context, as preachers were trained to imitate the postures and gestures commonly used to portray saints and biblical figures in stained glass and sculpture.<sup>11</sup> In a later era, when visual art was not widely accepted in certain traditions, pulpiteers like Jonathan Edwards and Charles Haddon Spurgeon liberally and effectively employed figures of speech and word pictures to enliven their preaching.

Richard Jensen reminds us that the use of imagery has not been without controversy in the history of the church. Iconoclastic movements in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century Eastern church, and during the Reformation period in Europe, challenged the use of visual elements in worship and in the ministry of the Word. Art was considered too sensual and material to be associated with the gospel, and church leaders feared a resurgence of the idolatrous worship that Scripture so clearly warned against.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most eloquent and ardent defenders of the use of visual elements in the church was John of Damascus, a church father of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. He not only recalls the widespread use of the arts in Israel's worship, as prescribed in Scripture, he also affirms the validity of sensory experience in apprehending truth and expressing faith, contending that "when we use all our senses to produce worthy images of Him, we sanctify the noblest of the senses, which is that of sight....Just as words speak to the ear, so the image speaks to the sight; it brings us understanding."<sup>13</sup>

While John of Damascus was primarily referring to artistic images rather than the visualization used in oral communication, his affirmation of the spiritual legitimacy and value of imagery applies to the work of visionary preaching, as well.

In the Reformation era, it was Martin Luther, according to Jensen, who became chief advocate for the use of images in the life of the church. While Luther was clear that the worship of images was wrong, he recognized that it was both natural and helpful to allow mental and material images of spiritual reality to enrich our understanding and communication of faith.<sup>14</sup> In his work, *Against The Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*, he writes:



But it is impossible for me to hear and bear [Scripture] in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not, when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross forms in my heart....If it is not a sin but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes?<sup>15</sup>

While Luther was defending the use of artistic images in the church, his appeal to the value of mental images affirms the importance and effectiveness of visual preaching.

In his book, *Imago Dei*, Jaroslav Pelikan reminds us that Jesus didn't come merely as, "the Word," but as "the Word made flesh." He came to be seen, not just heard.<sup>16</sup> Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gospel writers provided us with portraits of Jesus, not just sayings, so that our imaginations could and would produce mental images to inform our knowledge of Christ and inflame our love for Him.

Certainly there are cautions and limitations to the use of imagery in preaching, which will be considered later in this chapter, but there is abundant historical precedent for the validity and effectiveness of visual elements in ministering the Word.

### **The Age of Visualcy**

While the visual dimension has always been important to communication, it is especially important today, in what some have described as "the third age of communication."<sup>17</sup> For thousands of years, communication was primarily oral. Stories, sayings, and songs were passed from one generation to another around campfires, at ceremonial events, and in the common conversations of life. Business transactions, political deliberations, and interpersonal relationships were sustained by the spoken word.

In the second age, written communication dominated social, political, commercial, and even religious life. The masses became literate, the printing press made written material widely available, and books, letters, and newspapers became the primary vehicles for communicating information. Even the computer, in its early iterations, was used primarily to enhance the storage, processing, and disseminating of written content.

With the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes the shift to a visual age of communication, in which images are the primary means by which people communicate with one another and by which societies process and disseminate knowledge. This shift was set in motion by the film industry and by television in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But now, thanks to advances in technology and the ubiquity of computer monitors, TV screens, and cell phones, we have entered what journalist and cultural observer Andy Crouch calls, “the age of visualcy.”<sup>18</sup>

People today process information, and life itself, visually. We look for icons to direct us to the restrooms, or to locate our favorite coffeehouse, as well as to access the various features of our technological gadgets. We no longer to talk to a salesperson on the phone to gather information about a product or service, we go to a website to view pictures of the product, or to take a virtual tour of a vacation resort. Since the rise of MTV and music videos, it’s not uncommon to hear a young person say, “I’m going upstairs to watch some music.” Recently one of my teenaged sons took a fall and broke his front tooth in half. In the car, as we rushed him to the dentist, he took out his cell phone; not to call his friends, but to take a picture of his jagged tooth and send it to them! Who needs words?

Advertisers used to sell products by communicating content about their product, e.g. “4 out of 5 dentists recommend....” Today marketing is all about image.

Pharmaceutical companies advertise medications with scenes of people romping through flowered fields or fishing with their grandchildren, often without saying a word about what ills their drugs actually cure! “Branding” a product requires an iconic logo and positive images associated with that product or service. Media observers inform us that in a postmodern culture, comfortable with ambiguity and individualized truth, “visual images are replacing written texts as conveyers of information and meaning.”<sup>19</sup>

Church leaders and communicators dare not ignore this visual revolution.

*Leadership Journal*, a publication for church leaders, devoted an entire issue to exploring the legitimacy and effectiveness of visual elements in ministry. According to their survey, 73% of evangelical churches use some kind of visual enhancements in their worship and preaching.<sup>20</sup> The cover asks, “Is image-based preaching the new literacy?”<sup>21</sup>

More than ever, preachers need to be “image-smiths” as well as “word-smiths.”

The good news for preachers is that the use of visual elements in ministry is not an inconvenient adjustment or compromising accommodation, but rather a biblically-based, theologically-sound, and historically-grounded means of communicating God’s truth.

Visionary preaching enables communicators to leverage this new visualcy to transform lives and congregations.

### **A Methodolgy for Image-smiths**

Three simple steps enable the preacher to effectively employ visual elements in her preaching: Discover, Decide, and Develop.

## Discover

The first step in effectively employing visual elements is simply to discover them. Visionary preachers train themselves to look for images everywhere.

We begin, of course, with the text. Most every passage of Scripture will include some explicit or implicit visual elements for the preacher to exploit. Sometimes the biblical author or speaker presents the image on a silver platter. When the psalmist declares that, “He alone is my rock...and my fortress” (Psalm 62:2), when Jesus describes himself as “the bread of life” (John 6:35), or when Paul says, “I have finished the race” (2 Timothy 4:7), the inspiring Spirit is inviting us to explore the rich meanings latent within those images. Similarly, narrative passages provide easy opportunities to paint word pictures on the canvas of the mind, allowing the listener to witness the miracle of manna in the morning, or the wonder of a lame man leaping for joy. Other times the visual dimensions of a text are embedded in the words themselves. A word study of the biblical words for “sin,” for instance, will turn up root meanings like “missing the mark” or “crossing a boundary,” which can add a visual dimension to the exposition of the text. Visionary preachers learn to look over a passage of Scripture the way a bird-watcher scans a meadow, alert to every flash of color, shape, or movement.

Secondly, images are waiting to be discovered in everyday experiences. If we really believe that “The heavens declare the glory of God,” (Psalm 19:1), and that the work of the Spirit is “written...on tablets of human hearts,” (2 Corinthians 3:3), then the preacher will walk through life with eyes wide open for sights that illumine and illustrate the truths of Scripture. A walk through a flowering meadow yields all kinds of illustrations for a message on “the lilies of the field” (Matthew 6:28), and a walk through

the red light district provides plenty of images of “the godlessness and wickedness” of humankind (Romans 1:18). A preacher mulling over the story of Moses’ infancy in Genesis 2 finds himself on an airplane, seated behind a young mother frantically trying to quiet her crying baby. With a just a few lines describing that experience, he can help his listeners imagine a Hebrew mother, anxiously shushing her baby so as not to be heard by Pharaoh’s soldiers. Fred Craddock reminds us that effective preaching “requires...empathetic imagination in the preacher, a capacity to receive sights, sounds, tastes, odors, and movements of the world about him.”<sup>22</sup>

A third source of images is the world of literature and history. There are scenes and characters that are emblazoned on the minds of listeners, providing visual fodder for the imaginative preacher. The mere mention of “Gettysburg” will immediately call to the minds of American listeners photos, paintings, movies, and re-enactments they’ve seen of that horrific battle. Those remembered scenes, stimulated by a vivid description of the battle, will incite yearning for an age when “every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire” (Isaiah 9:5). A preacher trying to tap into people’s deep longing for community need only recite a few lines from Robert Frost’s poem, *Mending Wall*:

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,  
That sends the frozen ground-swell under it  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps only two can pass abreast.

Every listener in the room will conjure up images of the earth rising in silent protest to wall-building, and of sun-splashed breaches in walls that invite neighbors to come on

over. A well-read preacher who searches the archives of his mental art gallery will discover a wealth of visual cues to enhance the explanation or application of a biblical truth.

Finally, images abound in our media-driven culture. Americans are exposed to thousands of images in a given day. TV shows, movies, advertisements, magazines, and the internet provide a wealth of images that might offer insight or illustration into some biblical truth, text, or character. Thanks to technology, these images can often be projected on screens for the entire congregation to view at the appropriate moment. Instead of just referencing a celebrity to illustrate a point, why not put his or her picture up on the screen to imprint the face along with the truth. Done well, the next time listeners see that face on TV or a magazine cover, they will likely find the truth coming to mind, as well. Sometimes, it's more effective simply to paint the picture with words on the walls of the hearer's imaginations. With or without technical support, the strategic use of images from popular culture not only helps to communicate an idea, it also brings a sense of relevance to the message and enhances the credibility of the speaker.

The visionary preacher will take the time, early in her preparation, to identify the many images contained within or inspired by a given passage of Scripture. A simple approach would be to think through the various categories mentioned above – the text itself, nature and experience, literature and history, and the media – listing or even doodling the images that come to mind and determining which might add the most value to the message.

## Decide

The second step for the visionary preacher is to decide how to use the image. What purpose will the image serve, and how it will be integrated into the message? A variety of images can be sprinkled throughout a sermon to illustrate various points, or a single image can serve as a controlling motif for the entire message. Richard Jensen, following the lead of John Dominic Crossan, distinguishes between metaphors of illustration and metaphors of participation.<sup>23</sup> Metaphors of illustration serve as an aid to understanding a particular point or idea, and are meant to be “seen” temporarily and then fade into the background. Metaphors of participation play a more dominant role in the message, perhaps providing the overall structure for the message, or reappearing throughout the message so that the image becomes inextricably linked with the idea in the mind of the hearer.

The decision of how to use the image will most often be driven by how the image is used in the text. In a classic sermon entitled, *The Eagle and Its Brood*, Alexander Maclaren exposit Deuteronomy 32:11-12:

Like an eagle that stirs up its nest  
and hovers over its young,  
that spreads its wings to catch them  
and carries them aloft,  
The Lord alone led him;  
no foreign god was with him.

Since the simile plays a dominant role in the text, Maclaren allows it to play a similar role in the sermon. He not only begins with a description of the eagle to engage

the listener and set up the message, but then goes on to build his main points around various characteristics and habits of eagles.<sup>24</sup> When used in this way, the image gives flight to the message. Take it away, and the sermon plummets to earth for lack of structure and content. A preacher who merely used the eagle as a hook to begin the sermon, or to illustrate a point once along the way, would hardly be doing justice to the text.

On the other hand, a preacher working with Isaiah 40:30-31 might rightfully use the eagle once along the way to illustrate a key point.

Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;  
but those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not faint.

In this text, the soaring eagle is only one of several images employed by the biblical author. A sermon built entirely around the characteristics and habits of eagles would not feel very compelling or satisfying, because so much of the text would be undeveloped, and the original author's line of reasoning would be truncated.

In addition to using the visual element as controlling motif or as a point of illustration, a third option is to use the image to bookend the message; introducing it in the opening of the message to gain interest or set up the main idea, and then coming back to it at the conclusion to wrap up the message and drive the idea home. This *inclusio*



pattern not only provides a sense of resolution and completion to the message, it also helps to fuse the image and the idea in the listener's mind.

### Develop

After discovering the images to be used in the message, and then deciding what role they will play in the message, the visionary preacher must then develop the image in the body of the sermon to accomplish his purpose. This will typically involve explaining, exploring, and extending the image.

*Explaining* the image requires a clear statement that identifies the visual element and its significance to understanding or applying the text. While the image itself may often be obvious, like the eagle in Isaiah 40:31, the point of connection or illustration needs to be clearly stated, so the listener "sees" the right thing with his mind's eye. A speaker who spends 5 minutes describing the flight habits of eagles and concludes with a simple, "So it is with those who trust God," will leave his listeners wondering *how* it is with those who trust God. How much clearer for the speaker to say, "In the same way that an eagle is carried aloft by the wind, so those who trust God will, at times, find themselves lifted above their circumstances by the Spirit of God." If the speaker fails to make clear the point of connection, his listeners will be better informed about eagles, but will be clueless as to why or how they should hope in the Lord. While we are often tempted to be more subtle and clever in our use of metaphors, it is better to err on the side of clarity, especially in the early stages of learning to communicate visually.

After explaining the simple meaning of the image being used, the preacher is then free to begin *Exploring* the image; that is, to allow his imagination, and that of the listener, to run with the image a bit, and tease out its possible meanings. In his treatment

of Deuteronomy 32:11-12, Maclaren legitimately and skillfully elaborates on the breeding habits of eagles in order to enrich our understanding of God's care for his children. While all these details are not explicitly articulated in the text, the biblical writer, under the inspiration of the Spirit, is inviting the reader to use her imagination to discern the richness of the text.

In his apologetic for use of imagination in preaching, Warren Wiersbe pleads with preachers to go beyond mere hermeneutics, and to engage their creative and reflective capacities in handling a text. He writes:

But because we are in ministry, we have an even greater reason for opening the imagination to God's truth and beauty; we must communicate God's truth to others, and we can't do this effectively unless we understand the important part imagination plays all that we do....[I]t takes more than left-brain exegesis and analysis, important as they are, to open up the treasures of the Bible.<sup>25</sup>

If the preacher hopes to engage the imaginations of the listeners, he must first allow himself the freedom to brainstorm, to daydream, and to play out scenarios in his mind the way a chess player visualizes all the possible outcomes of a particular move. When he discovers an image that will enrich the message, he will attempt in a few words to take the audience on the same imaginative journey he has just traveled – minus the dead ends. For instance, the preacher might describe an afternoon he spent on top of mountain peak, watching hawks ride thermals high into the sky. The word picture he paints for the congregation, and the insights he shares from the experience, will bring the biblical imagery to life. This exploration of the metaphor in the body of the message

allows the listeners to make the same discoveries for themselves; discoveries they will remember and revisit long after the sermon is over.

I approach each sermon's preparation with a fresh legal pad, and the first page of my notes is simply labeled, "Ideas." By the time I'm ready to outline the message, that Idea page will be completely covered with freely associated phrases, doodles, illustrations, quotations, book titles, movie scenes, current events, personal experiences, etc. Each scrawled word or picture represents a "rabbit trail" my mind followed for a time. Many lead nowhere and will never make it into the message, but the two or three that make the cut will be worth the hours spent chasing imagined rabbits down imaginary trails. The visionary preacher is willing to devote preparation time to this imaginative process, and then to do the hard work of crafting vivid and enlightening descriptions that enliven the listeners' imaginations, as well.

Finally, developing the image will often involve *Extending* it beyond the confines of the text and the message and into the lives of the listeners. Too often preachers reference an image so briefly, or use an illustration so narrowly, that they miss the vitality and impact it could add if they creatively considered and pointedly communicated the image's practical significance. Dallas Willard says:

The secret of the great teacher is to speak words, to foster experiences, that impact the active flow of the hearer's life. That is what Jesus did by the way he taught.

He tied his teachings to concrete events that make up the hearer's lives.<sup>26</sup>

For instance, Jesus didn't just describe his followers as "the light of the world," even though the metaphor alone is enlightening. He went on to explore the image by pointing out how foolish it would be to light a lamp and put it under a bowl instead of

putting it on a stand. This brought added richness to the metaphor. But he then went a step further and extended the metaphor into the actual lives of his hearers. “In the same way, let your light so shine before men so that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16). There was no mistaking what Jesus wanted them to do in response to his teaching. From a visionary preaching perspective, Jesus wasn’t interested in mere instruction, i.e. you are like light in the darkness, or exhortation, i.e., do more good deeds. He was after nothing less than transformation in the way they saw themselves and in the way they lived their lives. He painted a vivid, compelling, and believable future for his followers that they could both understand and attain.

These principles of explaining, exploring, and extending an image are further illustrated in a message entitled, “Unbreakable,” included in Appendix B.

### **Words of Caution**

Several cautions are in order when implementing the methodology discussed above. While speakers and listeners are free to use their imaginations in the exploration and application of biblical images, the insights they arrive at must always be subject to the clear and authoritative words of Scripture. While aspects of the breeding habits of eagles may illustrate and illumine the biblical author’s use of that metaphor, we dare not base our theology or practice on truths that are not contained in the text, or affirmed in other passages of Scripture.

Secondly, preachers must be cognizant of an image’s potential to overshadow the truth it is meant to communicate or illumine. Some images are so emotionally loaded, or so visually striking, that people fixate on the image and miss the point of the sermon.

Graphic descriptions of a violent crime, for instance, can be so unsettling and distracting that listeners are unable to re-engage with the flow of the message. Furthermore, it is important to remember that a powerful negative image will usually need an equally or more powerful positive image or element in order to send listeners home with a sense of redemption and hope.

Thirdly, while technology can greatly facilitate the introduction of visual elements into a message, sometimes a low-tech approach can be most effective. Whenever a visual element is projected on screens, whether an image or bullet-point, the speaker momentarily loses her personal connection with the listeners; they are relating to the screen instead of the speaker. If the image is powerful enough, it's worth the momentary loss of eye contact. But if it happens too often in the course of the message, the speaker forfeits the strength of her personal presence and relationship with the audience.

Similarly, showing a scene from a movie quickly engages an audience and provides a vivid visual element to a message. However, for those few moments the speaker has yielded "control" of the audience's mental processing of the scene. People will see and interpret the scene individually, and not always in keeping with the speaker's intentions. When the speaker describes the scene for the listeners, she is better able to focus their attention on the salient details and to elicit her desired mental or emotional response to the scene. When using technology, the preacher will need to consider whether the visual impact of the projected image is worth the accompanying loss of control and connection.

## **We Shall Behold Him**

One of the most satisfying compliments I have ever received on my preaching was offered up years ago by a 10 year old boy in my first congregation. Jason was an energetic, likeable kid whose ADD often frustrated his parents and teachers, and made it difficult for him to be successful in traditional learning environments, including Sunday School. I had often prayed with his mom about Jason's struggles, and her desire to see him grasp and experience the love and grace of Christ in his life.

One day she came to me quite excited and told me that on their way home from church Jason had announced from the back seat, "I like it when Pastor Wilkerson preaches." "That's great," his mom replied happily. "What do you like about it?" Jason said, "He puts pictures in my head of Jesus that stay there." Jason is 20-something years old now. My guess is he doesn't remember a word I said from the pulpit. But I'm convinced those pictures of Jesus are still in his head, shaping his life and faith.

The apostle John looks forward to the day when our spiritual formation will be complete, and we will become the people we were created and called to be, fully conformed to the image of God's Son. According to John, the final transformation will not be fully accomplished until we see Christ in all his glory: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him just as he is" (1 John 3:2). Someday, we all shall behold him and be like him, fully and forever. In the meantime, it is the work of the preacher to put pictures of Jesus in people's heads that stay there, hastening the day when we shall be like him.

## NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nature: Addresses and Lectures (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin Company, 1903) 32.
- <sup>3</sup> Warren Wiersbe, Preaching and Teaching With Imagination (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994) 42.
- <sup>4</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Fred Craddock, As One Without Authority (Enid, OK: The Philips University Press, 1971) 78.
- <sup>6</sup> Wiersbe, 24.
- <sup>7</sup> Wiersbe, 25.
- <sup>8</sup> Richard Griffin, "Preaching For Spiritual Growth," diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2003, 18, emphasis added.
- <sup>9</sup> Richard Jensen, Envisioning The Word (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 18.
- <sup>10</sup> Jensen., 26.
- <sup>11</sup> Marguerite Miles, as cited by Richard Jensen in Envisioning The Word, 27.
- <sup>12</sup> Jensen, 31-33.
- <sup>13</sup> John of Damascus, On the Divine Images: Three Apologies against Those Who Attack the Divine Images, trans. David Anderson, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980) 25.
- <sup>14</sup> Jensen, 57-58.
- <sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, "*Apologetic for Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*" Luther's Works, Vol 40. Church and Ministry II, ed. Conrad Bergendorff (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958) 81-82.
- <sup>16</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, Imago Dei: The Byzantine Apologia for Icons (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Eric Reed, "Preaching By Faith And Sight," Leadership Journal 28.3 (2007) 25.
- <sup>18</sup> Reed., 25.

## NOTES

<sup>19</sup> Joel Martin and Conrad Oswald, Jr. eds, Screening the Sacred (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995) 153.

<sup>20</sup> Reed, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Leadership Journal 28.3, cover.

<sup>22</sup> Craddock, As One Without Authority, 86.

<sup>23</sup> Jensen, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander MacLaren, as cited by Warren Wiersbe in Developing a Christian Imagination, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1995) 123.

<sup>25</sup> Wiersbe, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (San Francisco: Harper, 1998) 114.



## CHAPTER 6: STORY

### “THE REST IS STILL UNWRITTEN”

#### Unwritten

*I am unwritten,*

*Can't read my mind*

*I'm undefined*

*I'm just beginning*

*The pen's in my hand*

*Ending unplanned*

*Staring at the blank page before you*

*Open up the dirty window*

*Let the sun illuminate the words*

*That you could not find*

*Reaching for something in the distance*

*So close you can almost taste it*

*Release your inhibitions*

*Feel the rain on your skin*

*No one else can feel it for you*

*Only you can let it in*

*No one else, no one else*

*Can speak the words on your lips*

*Drench yourself in words unspoken*

*Live your life with arms wide open*

*Today is where your book begins*

*The rest is still unwritten<sup>1</sup>*

Natasha Bedingfield

As the lyrics to this Top 40 song suggest, people think of their life as a story. Some see the story as already written, with little that can be done to change the script. They may rail against the storyline that's been handed to them, or quietly surrender to it, but they never imagine or pursue the possibility of a different outcome. Others view their life as a story still being told, with the next chapter still unwritten, and the pen in their hands.

Visionary preachers recognize that storytelling instinct, and unleash its power to shape, or to re-shape, a person's life and faith. By effectively employing narrative style and elements, preachers are able to enter into people's own stories, show them where their story intersects with God's Story, and then empower them to write a new and better ending, consistent with God's good and eternal purpose for them and the world.

This chapter will begin by establishing the formative role that story plays in people's lives and in the Scripture. Secondly, we will discover why story is so important to preaching that transforms lives. And finally, we will explain how preachers can strengthen the visionary impact of their messages by including narrative elements within a traditional sermon format and by structuring their messages in a narrative style.

## The Storytelling Instinct

Storytelling is an ancient and primal form of human expression, and a primary means by which people identify themselves and their place in the world. Primitive cave paintings tell tales of a successful hunt or a pivotal battle. Myths helped ancient people to understand the natural world around them, and to process their inner fears and longings. Tribal tales told around bonfires affirm a culture's values, and locate a people group in time and space. Histories provide nations with defining moments and iconic heroes that establish their identity and destiny on the world stage. On a personal level, people derive great significance from the story of their own lives – the “mythology” of their birth, tales from their growing up years, adolescent adventures, love letters, diary entries, *curricula vitae*, family histories, scrapbooks, memoirs, even obituaries. These narratives provide comfort, inspiration, and significance to people as they journey through life.

Stories not only help us to understand ourselves and our world, they actually shape our lives, our character, and our destinies. The Harvard psychiatrist, Robert Coles, contends that people learn their most lasting lessons and form their deepest held values through stories.<sup>2</sup> Neuroscientists tell us that “our brains are continually in the process of being shaped, sculpted by our interactions, by our experiences, and by the narratives that surround us,” such that stories “don’t just inform our brains, they shape them.”<sup>3</sup> Roger Standing summarizes the formative impact of stories when he writes, “the narrative of our lives – the experiences we have and the choices we make – define our personal identity,” and help us “to locate ourselves in the world.”<sup>4</sup> Brian McLaren suggests that “the stories we tell write the script for our lives.”<sup>5</sup> For example, a person who

understands their past as a series of disappointments and hardships sets the trajectory of their life toward more of the same.

The media driven age in which we live has only intensified the influence of stories on our personal and cultural psyche. Songs, sitcoms, soap operas, bestsellers, blockbuster movies, even the advertisements we're bombarded with throughout the day are telling stories that inform our view of the world and our understanding of love, happiness, success, faith, and every other aspect of human experience. The postmodern mindset, in particular, values story and experience over propositional thought and rational debate.

People bring this storytelling instinct and their story-formed identities into church with them every Sunday. And as Calvin Miller reminds us, “[many] of their life-stories are not working out.”<sup>6</sup> The preacher who ignores story will not only fail to connect with her listeners, but will forfeit the opportunity to re-write the scripts that are shaping their lives.

### **A Storytelling God**

Story is important to preaching not only because people view their lives in terms of story, but because stories are so central to God's written revelation of Himself. A survey of the Bible will reveal that one-third to one-half is in narrative form. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the Bible begins and ends with creation stories. In both stories God creates heavens and earth. In both stories, people enjoy fellowship with God and one another. In both stories, trees play pivotal roles in the unfolding narrative. In a providential display of narrative genius, these two stories not only form tidy bookends to the Scripture, they remind us that the Bible is one Story after all.

We find a similar dynamic at work when we come to the centerpiece of the Scripture – the life and teaching of Jesus. The dominant literary form in each of the gospels is narrative; either stories about Jesus, or stories told by Jesus. Furthermore, the gospels themselves are structured in narrative style, weaving propositional material into skillfully-crafted accounts of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And when we discover how intentionally the Old Testament prepares us for the ministry of Jesus, and how dramatically the New Testament extends and interprets the ministry of Jesus, we recognize, again, that the Bible is one Story. As Miller reminds us, “Christianity does not contain the story of Christ; it *is* the story of Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

Apparently the Author of Scripture has confidence in the power of story to communicate truth and transform lives. Elizabeth Achtemeier points out that “the Bible does not push a dogma on us; it lets us enter into events by imagination, until the story becomes our story and we are transformed by it.”<sup>8</sup> The preacher who ignores story will not only fail to reflect God’s preferred method of revelation, but will limit the life-changing potential of his messages.

### **Why Stories Work**

While the importance of narrative elements in preaching has long been understood, the visionary preacher has a heightened interest in leveraging the power of story. It has been noted that visionary preaching is not just about painting pictures of the future, but about winning belief in that future and empowering people to pursue it. Narrative accomplishes this in several distinctive ways.

First, stories promote listeners’ personal identification with and engagement in the sermon. Schoolteachers know that rowdy children immediately settle down and pay

attention when they hear the words, “Once upon a time....” And when the story has ended, they’ll go play it out, taking on the persona of their favorite character. Similarly, every preacher has seen listeners perk up their ears and lean forward in their seats when he shifts into storytelling mode. They can’t help but listen, because they want to know what happens next! They can’t help but take sides, identifying with the hero, or the victim, or even the villain. And they can’t help but compare their life situation to the one in the story, consciously or subconsciously making personal application. Listeners who are thus engaged, emotionally as well as intellectually, are much more likely to be affected by a message both in the moment and afterward.

Secondly, experiential learning is more transformative than didactic learning. Since stories engage listeners on a personal level, as noted above, the listeners don’t just hear the sermon, they experience it. Through the use of story, a sermon becomes an event, or a happening, rather than the mere impartation of information. Stephen Cobb explains that the story gives people “experiential knowledge” that influences character and behavior more profoundly than a mere lecture would.<sup>9</sup> Calvin Miller declares that “stories are the real life-changers. Their first and most significant ‘product’ is conversion, [but] they also confront and change lives.”<sup>10</sup> John Wright argues that the narrative crafting of a “negative hermeneutical moment,” (which will be discussed later) sets the stage for transformational impact.<sup>11</sup> Since the goal of visionary preaching is to empower listeners to become new and better people, the transformative impact of story cannot be ignored.

Thirdly, stories effectively bypass our natural defense mechanisms. One of the reasons stories are so transformational is that they sneak up on us, catching us by surprise

before we are able to deflect an incriminating insight or dismiss a point as irrelevant. In his seminal work, *Overhearing the Gospel*, Fred Craddock develops Kierkegaard's concept of "indirection" as a means of helping people to find fresh truth in a familiar text, or to hear a truth that might be resisted in direct confrontation.<sup>12</sup> Nathan leveraged the indirect power of narrative to expose David's sin against Uriah. By engaging David in a simple story of a rich man exploiting a poor man, the prophet prompted David to incriminate himself by pronouncing judgment on an imaginary character whose crime was far less heinous than his own. Contemporary churchgoers are no more eager to confront their sin than David was, and most unbelievers come to church armed with arguments and assumptions to repel a preacher's frontal assault on their position. The visionary preacher slips past those defenses with stories that expose fallacy or inspire faith before listeners know what hit them.

Fourthly, narrative elements in a message relocate the listeners in God's story. We have already established the narrative structure of God's revelation of Himself. It's a redemptive story that catches all creation and every human being in its sweep. But most people don't know that. They feel isolated and insignificant. Life appears to be random, with history leading nowhere in particular. But when they hear the story of a young widow named Ruth, who is led to a strange land where she is loved by a grieving mother-in-law, redeemed by a noble landowner, and blessed with a child who becomes a forerunner of God's Messiah, they can begin to believe in a God who knows their story, and is able to work things together for good. Suddenly, they can envision a better future for themselves; a life of significance and purpose. Cobb sums it up when he writes, "The

Bible does not push a dogma on us; it lets us enter into events by imagination, until the story become our story and we are transformed by it.”<sup>13</sup>

Finally, stories create forward momentum that propels listeners into a new way of living. People often come to church feeling weary and defeated. A sermon that burdens them with more “shoulds and oughts” only serves to weigh them down with more obligations that they can’t fulfill. Stories, on the other hand, bring energy to a message and enliven listeners with new possibilities of change and positive outcomes. Eugene Lowry describes a narrative message as “generative...[having] natural unfolding power.”<sup>14</sup> Whether it’s drawn from the Scripture or from a contemporary setting, a story of transformation, deliverance, or impact sends listeners out into the world with a spring in their step, believing and even expecting such things in their experience. This momentum, or energy, helps to accomplish the empowering that is so central to visionary preaching.

One Sunday I was speaking on the subject of reaching out to those around us with the good news of God’s love and life. After explaining the importance of sharing our faith, and offering some simple steps to take in that regard, I told a story of an experience I’d had that week. A slightly condensed version follows:

Earlier this week, I was out for a bike ride through Concord and Carlisle. It was one of those sparkling autumn days we’ve been enjoying this year. Blue sky, blazing leaves, all shades of brown in the meadows and marshes. I was so thankful to be living in such a beautiful place, and for the health and freedom to be out on a bike enjoying it all. It happened to be my birthday, so I was feeling especially reflective; humbled and amazed by God’s gifts to me, and the life He’s



called me to. As I rode along, I began singing one of our worship songs:

“Everything that’s beautiful, everything that’s wonderful, every perfect gift comes from You.”

Right about that time another rider passed me going the other way. We exchanged the usual biker greeting – a subtle nod of the head. And as he passed I thought to myself, “Does he know? Does he know that every perfect gift comes from God? Does he know that the God who created all this also created him, to display his glory as surely as the leaves on these trees? Does he know the joy of praising God as he rides?” In that moment, I wanted him to know that.

Then I began thinking about the people who live on my block – do they know this kind of joy, and meaning? I started thinking about other people I knew...I started thinking about some of you, actually – who I know are still sorting things out spiritually. And in that moment I wanted *everyone* to know God’s love and goodness and purpose. I didn’t want anyone to have to live another day apart from God. As I peddled furiously, I began to pray, “Lord, how can we tell them? How can we share this with them?”

The story was remarkably effective. Listeners were engaged because they were familiar with the roads and the foliage I was describing. Since I took time to develop the story with vivid imagery, personal details, and emotional appeal, their imaginations put them on the bike with me. My joy and disequilibrium and passion became theirs in the hearing of it. Since it began as a simple bike riding story, they had no reason to put up their defenses. Once my angst and eagerness over reaching out had become theirs, I was able to relocate them in our text, Matthew 5:9, and help them see themselves as

peacemakers who reconcile people to God. After moving quickly to the conclusion of the message, people left feeling inspired and empowered to reach out more naturally and passionately to the people in their everyday world, especially as the holiday season was just around the corner.

Clearly, an engaging story without biblical substance or rational development is simply a pep talk, not likely to have lasting impact. But when preachers are able to weave narrative elements effectively into their messages, those messages become transformative in their effect. Calvin Miller argues that “precept and story always make the best impact when they are used together in the sermon.”<sup>15</sup> With that end in mind, let’s consider how the visionary preacher can employ narrative to increase the visionary force of their messages.

There are two ways to apply the narrative art form to a sermon. The first, and more familiar, is to incorporate stories into a traditional, didactic structure. The second, which is especially attractive to the visionary preacher, is to structure the sermon itself in a narrative form.

### **Sermons *with* Stories**

Stories can simply and effectively be woven into a traditional sermon form in a variety of ways. It begins with the selection of the biblical text. Informational and exhortational preachers will most often turn to propositional texts. Therapeutic messages are often grounded in poetry and promises, while prophetic preachers often look to texts that confront and rebuke. Visionary preachers, however, are attracted to narrative passages, for the reasons articulated above, and will increasingly select them as a primary or supporting text.

As a young preacher, I instinctively went to the epistles, feeling more comfortable with their logical structure and more confident in my ability to exegete them accurately. I stumbled into the power of narrative when the Lenten season rolled around and I found myself in the gospel of Mark. Mark's vivid, concise stories captured and held the congregation's attention without a lot of help from my clever homiletical devices. I discovered that the simple storytelling techniques I'd learned in children's ministry were remarkably effective with adults, too. Listeners seemed to be moved by the messages, not just informed. They became fascinated with Jesus, and the possibility of becoming like him. Working with those simple gospel stories increased my confidence and competence to explore Old Testament narratives, where "the moral of the story" isn't always so evident. Again, I found that people resonated with the nitty-gritty realism of the Old Testament characters and dilemmas, and began to believe that God could meet them in their real world, too.

Even when working from a non-narrative passage, visionary preachers learn to look for narrative elements embedded or hidden in the text. Many of Paul's instructions in the epistles can be illumined by exploring the back-story of the church being addressed and/or the personalities being referenced. Many of the psalms, while devotional in tone and content, become transformational when we understand the events that prompted the author to write them. It's hard to find a more propositional text than Deuteronomy 5:12-15, which sets forth the commandment to keep the Sabbath. Yet, in establishing the commandment, the text references the story of Israel's deliverance from slavery. When the preacher helps listeners hear the commandment through the ears of people who for

generations were forced to work without ceasing, the command to rest is no longer an obligation to be borne, but an invitation to a new and better life.

Regardless of the biblical text being expounded, other kinds of stories can be used to introduce the message, to illustrate a principle, or to reinforce an application. Opening the message with a story immediately captures attention by engaging our intellect, as we wonder what's going to happen next, and our emotions, as we identify with the characters and feel the unresolved tension. It also brings energy to the message, creating a sense of movement and action. The visionary preacher will be careful to harness that energy by linking it to the primary thrust of the message with a carefully crafted transitional sentence. Introductory stories that lead nowhere undermine the speaker's credibility and activate the hearers' "selective listening" filter.

Stories can be employed in the body of the message, not only to illustrate concepts, but to enliven them with vividness and believability. The visionary preacher wants listeners not only to see and hear an idea, which the image and word elements accomplish, but also to feel it, which is the contribution that story makes. When we inform people that Christ can be glorified in an illness, and then tell the story of a woman from the congregation who radiated Christ from her hospital bed, it enables the listeners to experience that truth vicariously. The story not only clarifies their understanding of the truth, it creates an expectancy that the same thing can be true when they fall ill.

Finally, a narrative ending to an otherwise didactic message reinforces the points that were developed, provides an example of truth put into action, and sends listeners out into the world believing that such things are possible for them, too. Coming up with such stories can be a challenge for the preacher. How often are we sitting at our desk late in

the preparation process, saying to ourselves, “if only I had a story to bring it home!” We don’t want to go to the well of our own experience too often, and stories mined from the internet can often feel artificial and formulaic. We have discovered that the congregation itself can be a rich source of personal, relevant, and believable narratives.

We recently invited the congregation to submit “stories of transformation” to go with a preaching series on that theme. People could submit them by email or letter, anonymously or personally, with the promise that no story would be used publicly without their permission. Occasionally we invited the person to come share the story personally at the close of the message, but most often we simply read their story, with some minor edits that they approved. We received more than enough stories to use, and after the first few weeks we had created an expectancy for the transformation story at the end of the message.

Stories introduce a visionary dimension whenever they are incorporated into a message. Thomas Long writes:

Each new story we encounter is placed alongside the old stories for comparison.

Sometimes the new story confirms our world view, but on other occasions it

challenges that world view – and we must choose in which world we will live.<sup>16</sup>

### **Sermons as Stories**

As effective as stories can be when woven into a traditional sermon format, the visionary impact increases exponentially when the message itself is structured in a narrative format. Indeed, Roger Standing goes so far as to say that “story doesn’t illustrate a point, story is the point.”<sup>17</sup> He goes on to suggest that God has designed us to live in a narrative-defined experience of reality.<sup>18</sup> If it is true that our brains are wired for

story-telling and story-living, then a story-formed sermon surely has formational and transformational potential.

Eugene Lowry's concept of "the homiletical plot" has informed and inspired a resurgence of narrative preaching. He challenges preachers to think of themselves as "narrative artists,"<sup>19</sup> and to craft their messages along a story line consisting of 5 movements: Upsetting the Equilibrium (Oops!), Analyzing the Discrepancy (Ugh!), Disclosing the Clue to Resolution (Aha!), Experiencing the Gospel (Whee!), and Anticipating the Consequences (Yeah!).<sup>20</sup> This narrative development is designed to turn the sermon into an "event-in-time"<sup>21</sup> that allows the gospel "to do what it says."<sup>22</sup> In other words, the listeners don't just hear and understand a biblical truth, they experience it, and it's redemptive power is set in motion by the preaching moment.

Having not read Lowry's work until recently, I was pleased to find scholarly insight and validation for an approach to preaching that I have grown into over the years. I have developed a simple story-structure that has proven helpful both in expositing biblical narratives and in crafting sermons in a narrative format. While there are obvious similarities to Lowry's model, the homiletical structure I've adopted has 4 movements, rather simply labeled: The Set-Up, The Build-Up, The Blow-Up, and The Wrap-Up. The Parable of the Good Samaritan will serve to illustrate the model and its movements (Luke 10:25-37).

### The Set-Up

The Set-Up of the message is designed to begin the story line, introduce the main "characters," – key concepts, terms, etc. – and introduce some conflict that will engage the listener intellectually, emotionally, or practically. Like Lowry's Upsetting the

Equilibrium stage, the purpose of The Set-Up is to produce ambiguity, or “tension,” to use Haddon Robinson’s term.<sup>23</sup>

The Set-Up is not unlike a traditional sermon introduction in that it captures attention, orients listeners to the subject, and raises a felt need. It does not require the sermon to begin with a story, but can just as easily include a provocative quote, intriguing statistics, a pop culture reference, or even a challenging question. But in contrast to a deductive sermon introduction, The Set-Up doesn’t announce or even hint at the resolution of the tension. The propositional truth of the message, or, the big idea, is not presented up front. Instead, listeners are launched on a journey toward resolution; a journey they can’t resist because of the storytelling instinct discussed earlier, and their innate need to resolve ambiguity.<sup>24</sup> People don’t just *want* to listen, they *have* to listen.

Jesus begins the Parable of the Good Samaritan by vividly describing a disturbing but common mugging, engaging the listeners emotionally with the plight of the traveler, and creating ambiguity around the ultimate fate of the poor man dying by the side of the road.

In the same way that a novelist will carefully craft his opening lines to create ambiguity, e.g. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” so the preacher will give considerable attention and craft to The Set-Up. In a 30-minute message, I typically devote 5 minutes of speaking time and many hours of preparation time to this first movement. I want people to be fully engaged and oblivious to anything else by the time we’re ready to transition to the second movement.

## The Build-Up

The Build-Up of the message advances the journey toward resolution by exploring, explaining, and analyzing the biblical content in light of life's realities and human experience. This movement will typically include historical and cultural background, word studies, and textual insights, along with illustrations that enhance meaning and/or connect the biblical content to contemporary life. Lowry calls for depth at this stage – probing meaning, causes, reasons, motives, etc.<sup>25</sup>

The Build-Up will often lead to what Lowry calls “dead ends;” investigation and reflection that doesn't lead to resolution of the primary ambiguity.<sup>26</sup> The preacher is trying to recreate, in a condensed format, her own wandering journey toward understanding and resolution so that listeners can share the experience. These dead ends may yield some interesting insights, but also create a sense of anticipation for the discovery that will unlock the text's meaning and it's answer to the ambiguity. The Build-Up also provides opportunity for what Lowry calls, “foreshadowing,” which means introducing a story, a phrase, an image, or a character into the discussion that will reappear later in more dramatic fashion to drive home the big idea or inspire listeners to action.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, The Build-Up intensifies the hearers' longing for resolution as two passersby ignore the man. It also leads down some dead ends, revealing that the kinds of people they would have expected to help the man, didn't help him. At this point the listeners would have been puzzled; if religious leaders didn't stop to help the poor man, who would?



For preachers accustomed to working with 3-point messages, The Build-Up might include the first and second points. In other words, ground is being covered; the preacher is making progress on developing his message and the listeners are increasing their understanding of the text and/or the issue. But there is still a sense that we haven't arrived yet at our final destination; there's something important yet to be discovered. A narrative structure means that listeners are always wondering what's going to happen next; they have to keep listening. This movement will often take the listeners past the halfway mark of the message, occupying 15-20 minutes of a 30 minute message.

### The Blow-Up

The Blow-Up becomes the crux, or critical movement of the message, in which something surprising or wonderful or convicting is uncovered. The discontinuity between our story and God's Story is exposed. In this movement the preacher gets to the heart of the matter and/or the text, identifying a fresh insight or confronting a major interpretive problem. The Blow-Up causes listeners to perk up their ears or slide forward in their seats as they hear something they didn't expect to hear, or never heard before, or had subconsciously been longing to hear. It might prompt them to look again into the text to see for themselves if this thing is really true, or to breathe a sigh of relief as their angst is resolved, or to put their head in their hands and weep because they've been found out. According to Lowry this "Aha!" moment is when the listeners actually *experience* the truth being proclaimed, and the redemptive power of the gospel is released into their lives.<sup>27</sup>

Typically this movement will come about 2/3 of the way through the message, and will often be introduced by phrases like: "But what do we do about verse 3?," or,

“And yet we still have the problem of...,” or, “Even with all we’ve learned there’s still something bothering me about...?” But in addition to this key transitional phrase, The Blow-Up requires a compelling story, or a striking visual image, or at least some passion from the preacher in order to engage the listener on an emotional as well as an intellectual level. Sometimes the preacher’s narrative of his discovery of or encounter with this truth will provide the emotional engagement and impact that’s needed. However it is accomplished, The Blow-Up needs to be *felt*.

The Blow-Up in the Parable occurs when the third passerby, the despised Samaritan, not only stops to help the man, but goes to extraordinary lengths to care for the man and provide for him. At this point the hearers were likely muttering under their breath, turning to one another with confused and angry looks. It would have felt like an insult.

In this model, The Blow-Up incorporates Lowry’s Disclosing the Clue and Experiencing the Gospel movements, which he acknowledges can be accomplished in the same homiletical moment.<sup>28</sup> I have combined them because I’m reluctant to create distance between discovering the resolution (Aha!) and experiencing the good news (Whee!), lest the emotional impact be dissipated by too much time and too many words. (How many of us have ruined sacred moments by talking too much?!) This moment is especially important to the visionary preacher because it detonates an explosion of desire on the part of the listener to be transformed by and in this new reality that’s been uncovered.

## The Wrap-Up

The final movement is The Wrap-Up, which is more than a tidy summary and exhortation to “go forth and do likewise.” In this phase the preacher extends the truth that’s been discovered into the realities of our world and daily life. If biblical and/or theological assumptions have been challenged, the preacher is careful to articulate clearly the more accurate understanding of God’s Word and Ways. If wounds have been opened, the preacher tenderly applies the healing balm of the gospel. If challenges have been issued, the preacher offers a few action steps that invite listeners to explore this new reality. If the journey has been successful, there’s no need for “shoulds and oughts,” since the listeners are intrinsically motivated to seek change.<sup>29</sup> (See Chapter 3.) Most importantly, The Wrap-Up must employ one or more of the visionary elements to help listeners visualize their lives in light of this truth they have discovered. As we learned at the outset of this discussion, if they can see it, they can believe it. If they can believe it, they can choose it. And if they choose it, with God’s help, they can live it.

Jesus wraps up the Parable not only by inviting the listeners to ponder and apply its lesson, but by casting a fresh vision for “neighborliness.” He challenges the listeners to stop trying to decide who their neighbor is, but instead to *be* a neighbor to anyone who needs their help.

Lowry originally called this final movement, Anticipating the Consequences, but in his revised edition changed it to the more positive-sounding, Anticipating the Future.<sup>30</sup> It is important for the message to end with a sense of hope and expectancy, even if some uncomfortable realities and shortcomings have been confronted along the way. The gospel is good news, after all! It is appropriate as the sermon ends for the pastor to

express his confidence in the people, and to assure them of God's blessing as they take their first tentative steps toward this new life.

If the other phases of the message have been executed effectively, this final movement doesn't require a lot of time or words. I usually plan on about 5 minutes, unless there are a series of application steps, or an extended story that effectively summarizes and embodies the message. Since the sermon is itself a narrative, it is important for The Wrap-Up to deliver a sense of resolution or completion. For this reason, it is often helpful to come back to a story or character or image that was introduced earlier in the message. (Note the discussion of "foreshadowing" above.) Ideally, the listeners will feel that they've been on a journey that led to some interesting places and some close calls, but ultimately brought them to a destination that is better and grander than they land they left.

### **The Gospel as Tragedy**

While God's Story certainly is good news, John W. Wright has recently introduced a fresh perspective into the sermon-as-narrative approach. In his book, *Telling God's Story*, he highlights the difference between the classical understandings of tragedy and comedy. Comedy, whether of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* variety or the "I Love Lucy" genre, has a happy ending. While there are surprising twists and unsettling turns along the way, the final outcome reinforces our highest hopes and ideals, i.e., good conquers evil, love wins out, problems can be fixed. Tragedy, on the other hand, ends sadly; love is unrequited, evil lurks around every corner, the good die young. It shatters our notions of how the world should work, and calls into question our deeply

held convictions and beliefs. Comedy emphasizes continuity with our beliefs and practices, while tragedy creates discontinuity; things are not as we thought they were.<sup>31</sup>

Wright goes on to point out that most contemporary evangelical preaching is comedic; that is, it moves toward happy endings, and reinforces our moral and spiritual horizons.<sup>32</sup> Where those horizons are theologically sound and experientially accurate, that's a good thing. When our preaching helps people to see, hear, and feel truths they have understood but never fully believed or embraced, we empower them to glorify the God they have longed for and to become the person they have always wanted to be. That's the gospel, and preaching, as comedy.

However, some of our deeply held beliefs are unsound, and sometimes our horizons are too limited. Therefore, he argues, we need to hear more tragic preaching. (Not tragically poor, but tragic in structure!) Narrative sermons crafted as tragedies create “negative hermeneutical moments” that upset the flow of our lives and challenge our assumptions about reality and faith.<sup>33</sup> While these moments can be troubling, they force us to re-examine our beliefs and re-evaluate our lives. By disturbing our horizons, they open us to the possibility of a new, better, and more expansive future.

Visionary preachers will want to seize upon both comedic and tragic elements in their use of story. But the godless culture in which we live, and the skewed worldviews held by so many today, confirm Wright's recommendation that we need a more “tragic hermeneutic” if we are going to lead people into transforming encounters with God's Word.<sup>34</sup>

The preaching team at our church designed an 8-week series on the Beatitudes, called “Change of Heart.” We resisted the temptation to turn them into comedy –

saccharine sentiments and pretty promises. Instead, through words, images, and stories, we experienced them as the original hearers did – as tragedy; unsettling, scandalous, counter-cultural declarations of Kingdom realities. Week after week we were disturbed, exposed, and stripped of our shallow and self-righteous spirituality. But by the end of the series, pastors and congregation alike sensed God doing a new thing in us, individually and collectively. We sensed we needed “more of that;” not because we like getting beat up, but because it had stirred within us a holy discontent with life as usual, and an active yearning for the rule of God in our hearts.

### **Putting the Pen in Their Hands**

*No one else can feel it for you*

*Only you can let it in...*

*Today is where your book begins*

*The rest is still unwritten.*<sup>35</sup>

In this chapter we have established the power of story to form and transform people’s lives, and have demonstrated that preachers can leverage that power by incorporating narrative elements into traditional preaching modes, and by structuring the sermon itself in a narrative format. We’ve learned that people live story-formed lives, following a narrative handed to them by early life experiences, by the culture they live in, or by their own fallen imaginations. When that storyline is interrupted by a sermon, a sermon that introduces them to God’s better Story, they are inspired and empowered to pick up the pen God is offering them and, with His help, write the next chapter His good, eternal, and unfolding purpose for their lives.

## NOTES

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- <sup>4</sup> Roger Standing, Finding the Plot: Preaching in Narrative Style (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2004) 41-42.
- <sup>5</sup> Brian McLaren, “Shaped By Our Stories,” The Small Group Conference, Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois, October 5, 2004.
- <sup>6</sup> Calvin Miller, Spirit, Word, and Story (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 161.
- <sup>7</sup> Miller, 188, author’s emphasis.
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- <sup>9</sup> Stephen Cobb, “Narrative Preaching: Communicating Biblical Truth Through Story,” diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1997, 48.
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- <sup>11</sup> John W. Wright, Telling God’s Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007) 43.
- <sup>12</sup> Fred Craddock, Overhearing The Gospel (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978) 82.
- <sup>13</sup> Cobb, 61.
- <sup>14</sup> Eugene Lowry, The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) xxi.
- <sup>15</sup> Miller, 12.
- <sup>16</sup> Thomas Long, Preaching the Literary Forms of the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) 76.

## NOTES

<sup>17</sup> Standing, 119.

<sup>18</sup> Standing, 44-45.

<sup>19</sup> Lowry, xx. While I am uncomfortable with Lowry's embrace of the New Homiletic approach to expositing the Scripture, his narrative sermon structure is still valid and helpful. The transformational power of any aspect of a sermon derives from the propositional truth and transactional reality of the gospel itself, not the experience of proclaiming or hearing the sermon.

<sup>20</sup> Lowry, 26-27.

<sup>21</sup> Lowry, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Lowry, 76-77.

<sup>23</sup> Haddon Robinson. Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980) 165.

<sup>24</sup> Lowry, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Lowry, 43-44.

<sup>26</sup> Lowry, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Lowry, 54.

<sup>28</sup> Lowry, 118.

<sup>29</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>30</sup> Lowry, 120.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, 32-34.

<sup>32</sup> Wright, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Wright, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Wright, 44.

<sup>35</sup> Bedingfield.



## CHAPTER 7: PERSON

### “LIVING THE LIFE”

#### **A Vision-Embodier**

On a summer's night, after three years of youth pastoring, I closed the door on ministry. Temporarily, I hoped. Heaving a sigh of relief, I parked the church van and lowered the garage door for the last time before heading off to seminary. I felt as though a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders, and I wasn't sure how eager I was to take up another one. It wasn't that the ministry had been unfruitful or unsatisfying. On the contrary, it had been remarkably gratifying, with growth in numbers, expansion of programs, and many young lives changed eternally.

But it had taken a toll on me. Living in a parsonage on the church property, I had teenagers coming and going at all hours of the day and night. As a single man for the first two years, I had no life apart from church and kids. As a married man, the third year was more of the same, and for Karen and me it was a rough beginning to our partnership in ministry. We arrived at seminary feeling exhausted, unsettled, and wondering when, if ever, we would be ready to get back into ministry.

We found a large Baptist church where we could hide in the back row for an hour each Sunday. For the next six months that was all the church we could handle. But something happened in our hearts over those six months, and it happened mainly through the preacher, many rows removed at the front of the sanctuary. I can't tell you today what he preached, but from week to week it nourished my soul, and renewed my love for the Scripture. His love for the congregation was palpable, as was his love for Christ. I

remember the tenderness of his pastoral prayers, the warmth with he led Communion, and the gentle strength with which he challenged us to pursue fullness of life in Christ.

One Sunday we were invited to his home along with a handful of seminarians, where we enjoyed good food and easy conversation about life and ministry. Karen was encouraged to see up-close a couple that enjoyed the life of ministry, and I watched him cheerfully wash the dishes so his wife was free to sit and visit. That simple dinner helped us turn a corner in our attitudes toward the ministry.

We would have been happy to remain under his pastoral care for the next three years, but before long our hearts were so revived we found ourselves eager to get back in the game. We found our way to a small church where we could develop our pastoral skills, and by the time seminary was over we were ready and eager to take our first pastorate.

Pastor Bob Frederick restored my vision for ministry by living that vision before me. He didn't just lead people. He loved people. He didn't just preach messages. He embodied messages. I wanted to be like him, and determined that with God's help, I would be like him. Such is the power of visionary preaching.

If words bring clarity to a message by enabling us to hear it, and images bring vitality to a message by enabling us to see it, and stories bring energy to a message by enabling us to feel it, then the person of the preacher brings possibility to the message by enabling us to touch it.

John describes his gospel as, "that...which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at *and our hands have touched* – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" (I John 1:1, emphasis added). John's confidence in the

gospel was borne of the fact that Jesus had lived among them so intimately that they had seen, heard, and handled him, and found him to be the One he claimed to be. In the same way, preachers, by their very lives and presence, authenticate the message they proclaim by living it out in the presence of their hearers. Clyde Fant writes, “In preaching, Person comes to persons through a person.”<sup>1</sup>

If Phillips Brooks was right in describing preaching as “truth through personality,” his words have double import for visionary preachers.<sup>2</sup> If our goal is to empower people to pursue God’s better future, they must believe that future to be possible. When they see someone actually fulfilling that vision, or at least making progress toward it, they find the faith and courage to pursue it for themselves. Dallas Willard describes this dynamic when he writes, “Hearers sense the message opening up possibilities for them to live. In the presence of this kind of preacher, people find ways of doing the good that is before their hearts.”<sup>3</sup>

Bill Hybels, when training pastors to be visionary leaders, challenges them to be “vision-embodiers...whose life-values and commitments personify the vision” they are calling people to pursue.<sup>4</sup> Peter, the impulsive disciple who became the rock of the church, embodied the transformational gospel he preached. Paul, the Hebrew of Hebrews who became a missionary to the Gentiles, embodied a gospel for all people. John, the disciple Jesus loved, embodied the gospel of love. And Jesus was the ultimate vision-embodier, who not only lived the life of the Kingdom before us, but actually made it available to us through his death and resurrection. So the visionary preacher, by living out the life and gospel he preaches, makes it believable and available to his hearers.

## **A Model for Personal Ministry**

In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, we discover how significant Paul's person was to the communication of his message in that city. According to Acts, Paul only spent a short time in Thessalonica, but in that time his proclamation of the gospel led to dramatic and lasting change in the lives of his hearers. In the opening chapters of the letter, we find four qualities that are essential if the person of the preacher is to have visionary impact on his or her hearers

### Accessibility: "Be Available"

If our ministry is going to have incarnational impact, people need to be able to get close enough to us to see our message being fleshed-out in our lives.

Personal accessibility seems to have been a significant aspect of Paul's ministry in Thessalonica. He writes, "You know how we lived among you for your sake" (I Thessalonians 1:5b). Later on, he says, "We loved you so much we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us" (I Thessalonians 2:8). We don't know the details, but it appears from this letter and the account in Acts that Paul developed a close relationship with these believers in a relatively brief stay there. We can surmise that he spent time in their homes, not just teaching them, but listening to them, caring for them, and simply enjoying their company. When he writes, "we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you," it suggests that he worked among them to provide for himself, giving them an opportunity to see him and relate to him in a non-ministry context (I Thessalonians 2:9b). He was not afraid to get close to people, and was willing to be available to them in a variety of times and settings.

Most pastors minister under different circumstances today, enjoying private housing off the church property and a working life removed from the marketplace. Therefore, preachers need to be even more intentional about making themselves and their lives accessible to their hearers. That can be accomplished by making themselves available to people physically, and by making their personal selves and experience available through their preaching.

Physical availability can be accomplished in a variety of obvious ways, though the particulars may change according to the size and structure of the congregation. Personally, I believe a pastor's presence in the church lobby or foyer before and after services is essential to both perceived and actual accessibility. Certainly, the after-sermon handshakes can become perfunctory, and there is rarely time for extended conversation or counsel. More and more pastors are abandoning the practice because they find it distracting or tedious, and especially challenging when they have multiple services in rapid fire sequence. But simply being there, even for a few minutes, communicates a willingness to interact, and allows people the opportunity to look the preacher in the eye, to rub shoulders, to ask a question or request prayer or confirm a decision made during the service. It also communicates a readiness to stand by your message; to be questioned or challenged. I'm presently serving in a very large church, where people often assume the senior pastor is unavailable and unapproachable. But my presence in the lobby means that anybody, any Sunday, can get to me and make a personal connection. As exhausting and distracting as it can be, giving folks your full and best attention even for those momentary interactions gives you traction in their lives and credibility in the pulpit. I try to keep a note card or pad with me to jot down names,

so I can pray for them on Monday morning and arrange for any follow-up that might be required.

In addition, it is important for pastors to set aside a certain number of hours a week for personal appointments and visitation in hospitals or homes, no matter what size the church might be. I have found great value over the years of visiting people in their work settings, both to express my interest in their lives and to keep my preaching illustrations and applications grounded in the practical realities of their lives. Technology has brought new dimensions to the concept of availability, some of them advantageous and others burdensome. I've chosen to be available by email to the congregation, and generally respond to each one, even briefly. Like being present in the lobby, it provides both perceived and actual accessibility, even though it can be tedious and limited in its impact.

Physical availability will also include active participation in the life of the church outside the office and sanctuary, such as church picnics, training events, and cruising through the children's or student ministries on Sundays when one is not preaching. While it is certainly appropriate to set aside and guard study and preparation time, pastors should expect to be interrupted sometimes, and to consider the possibility that it's a divine interruption, essential to the preparation and delivery of the very message they might be working on at the time.

Inviting parishioners into one's home allows them to see a side of the preacher they will never see in public. When we were in a smaller church, we concluded every Newcomer's Class with a brunch in our home. That practice ensured that every new person to the church at least the opportunity to be in our home, and over the years

hundreds took advantage of it. In a larger church, our hospitality has focused more on elders, staff, and leadership teams. And remembering Pastor Frederick's example, we also have seminary students to our home on a regular basis! Every pastor will handle this differently, depending on their personality type, life-stage, and the size of the church, but nothing communicates availability like opening one's home.

Obviously, accessibility requires healthy physical and emotional boundaries, established and protected in cooperation with family members and church leaders. At the same time, there is a sacrificial side to the ministry, in which we surrender our rights to privacy and control in order to be available to people, and to the Lord.

It is also essential for the preacher to be accessible in the pulpit. Visionary preachers will develop style and content that allows us to "live among" the listeners and to "share with [people] not only the gospel but our lives as well" I Thessalonians 1:5; 2:8). Stylistically, it's important to use language that is accessible to the listening audience. This will require sensitivity to the demographics of the congregation, not only in terms of age, ethnicity, and socio-economic backgrounds, but also in terms of spiritual maturity. A pastor who wants to connect with younger generations will do well to include occasional references to pop music, TV shows, and cultural buzz words. Preaching in the academic milieu of greater Boston allows, and perhaps, requires, a preacher to use a more expansive vocabulary than he might in a different cultural context. As our congregation increases in ethnic diversity, I find myself looking for illustrations and application points that have particular resonance with some of our minority cultures. For example, when making a point about leadership, I might reference Martin Luther King, Jr. rather than George Washington or Ronald Reagan.

Even matters of dress can help or hinder accessibility. I find myself dressing more simply in New England pulpits than I did in the fashion-conscious environs of metro New York. I also find myself dressing more casually than I did 20 years ago. Many next-generation preachers don't even need to change out of their "church clothes" when they go home to watch the game on Sunday afternoon! While some traditional church-goers bemoan the loss of formality and "reverence" in dress, many younger and un-churched attenders find themselves more able to relate to the speaker who is dressed like they are. I still remember a spiritually-disinterested, blue-collar husband who suddenly became responsive to my preaching one sweltering Sunday when I took off my suit coat and rolled up my sleeves to preach!

A conversational style also contributes a sense of accessibility to the speaker, whereas a rhetorical or bombastic style creates a sense of distance. There are times and themes which call for a more formal style, but I find these kinds of messages are more effective when they stand in contrast to the more conversational approach from week to week. When a preacher can be free from her notes, when she is able to maintain real eye contact throughout the message, when she includes rhetorical questions that engage the audience, when she anticipates their next question or emotion, and when she includes easy, natural humor, it gives the message the feel of dialogue rather than monologue. Listeners feel as though they are talking with a friend or coach rather than listening to an expert they can never hope to emulate.

In addition to stylistic considerations, a visionary preacher must also be prepared to include personal content in his messages. Transparency and vulnerability are essential if listeners are to believe that the preacher, like Elijah, is "a man just like us" (James



5:17). I grew up listening to a fine preacher who was well-regarded and widely-published in his day. His messages were biblically solid, clearly structured, and effectively illustrated. He told many stories, but they were always about other people; rarely about himself. (It wasn't until years later I realized that when he sometimes said, "there once was a man who..." or, "a little girl once asked her father..." he was actually telling stories from his own life!) That detached stance wasn't unusual for the times; it was considered poor form to tell personal stories from the pulpit, in order to avoid calling attention to oneself. While his preaching was highly effective from an instructive point of view, I would never have described it as inspirational or transformational. While I admired him, I couldn't imagine myself being as disciplined, or patient, or godly as he seemed to be.

Times have changed. With people telling-it-all on talk shows and posting their daily itineraries on personal websites, our culture demands to know the real person behind the pulpit: "Is he like me?" "Does she make mistakes?" "Does he practice what he preaches?" Fred Craddock challenges the guarded detachment of earlier generations when he writes, "the notion that distance between the speaker and the hearer will prevent attachment to the messenger instead of the message is very likely to be the complete opposite of the truth."<sup>5</sup> When preachers allow themselves to be known, warts and all, they become more human; more likely to be imitated than idolized. Pastor Frederick's availability to us, both through his warm preaching style and personal hospitality, enhanced his ability to speak into my life and provided me with an inspiring vision of the kind of pastor and husband I wanted to be.

A final aspect of accessibility involves longevity. It takes years for a pastor and congregation to get to know each other, and even longer to trust each other. The simple act of showing up Sunday after Sunday, year after year, communicates to a congregation that the pastor really cares about them and the future of their church. It is commonly accepted that a pastor's leadership capital increases significantly after the fourth or fifth year. I believe the same dynamic applies to his preaching effectiveness, as well. Over the course of many years a pastor will speak into a variety of personal, congregational, and cultural situations, gaining credibility and familiarity with each year that passes. Jesus said of the good shepherd that "the sheep know his voice" (John 10:4). The childhood pastor I spoke of earlier wasn't especially transparent, but he ended up staying at that church for 40 years, well into my adulthood. I spoke with him on the phone not too long ago, having been out of touch with him for several years. The moment I heard his voice, I recognized it as the voice of my shepherd, and instantly felt loved, cared for, and nearer to God. Preachers who want to see deep and lasting change in their listeners and churches will stay for the long haul.

#### Authenticity: Be Real

A second personal quality essential to the visionary preacher is authenticity. It's quite a popular word these days, and speaks of believability, integrity, and genuineness. Paul establishes the authenticity of his ministry in Thessalonica when he writes:

For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover

up greed – God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else (I Thessalonians 2:3-6).

Paul's motives were pure, his message was sound, his words were honest, and his audience, ultimately, was God. Nothing less will do for preachers today. In a powerful message delivered at Willow Creek's Leadership Summit in 2007, John Ortberg warns leaders to beware of their "shadow mission." The shadow mission, as Ortberg describes it, is our God-given mission "hijacked" by our own ego or woundedness.<sup>6</sup> We find ourselves speaking or leading to meet our own needs for recognition or approval, using the pulpit to advance our own reputation or career. We present a false image of ourselves in order to enhance our message or status. These are examples of the impure motives, flattery, and masks Paul refers to in his letter.

Authenticity begins from our very first days with a congregation, even in the candidating process. When considering the call to become senior pastor at Grace Chapel, I was very aware of the fact that I would be following a high-profile, highly-effective pastor and preacher, Gordon MacDonald. Before one of my early interviews with the Search Committee, Karen reminded me to, "be your own true self." It was good counsel. There is no point in pretending to be someone you're not. Not only is it dishonest, but the real "you" will be discovered sooner or later! Certainly we strive to be better than we are, and to learn from those who are more accomplished than we are. It happened that Gordon MacDonald had actually been a distant "mentor" of mine for many years. His writing and speaking had shaped me in many ways. But his gifts and calling are not mine. In the end we can only be the person God created us to be, our own true selves. There is great freedom in that, and great credibility. Warren Wiersbie writes, "You must

know yourself, accept yourself, be yourself, and develop yourself – your best self – if preaching is to be most effective.”<sup>7</sup>

Authenticity means we are the same person in the pulpit that we are at home and in the neighborhood and around the church office. Turning on our “preacher’s voice” when we step into pulpit, or using vocabulary we would never use in everyday conversation, creates a disconnect between our public and private selves that not only distracts our listeners, but undermines our credibility. If we talk as if we love our church and congregation, we’d better demonstrate that by our attitudes and actions out of the pulpit. Wiersbie reminds us that “preaching is not what we do, it’s what we are...because the work we do cannot be isolated from the life we live.”<sup>8</sup>

Authenticity requires that we do our own work in crafting messages. With the plethora of print and internet resources available to preachers today, it is easy to “borrow” outlines, illustrations, and entire manuscripts from other preachers. While it would seem obvious that plagiarism is unacceptable in the pulpit, it is increasingly and alarmingly common for preachers to use others’ material without attribution. When we pass off insights or experiences from others as if they were our own, we not only deceive our listeners and disrespect our sources, we rob ourselves and the congregation of an opportunity for God to do something fresh and unique in us. It is that fresh and unique work of the Spirit and the Word in our lives that lifts our preaching from informational to transformational. While it is occasionally cumbersome or even distracting to have to include attributions in our messages, the integrity and credibility of our message is worth the effort.

Finally, authenticity calls us to be genuine, growing followers of Christ, and to speak out of the realities of our own faith journey. When we share “successes” with the congregation, it provides them with a living example of what a truth looks like when lived out, and gives them hope that they can experience it, too. When we share failures, it gives them freedom to try and fail, too, which is how we all learn and grow. It’s important to share both with the congregation. People are put off by someone who always gets it right, and unlikely to follow someone who always gets it wrong! Fred Craddock writes, “The communicator is striving to become while urging others to become. To the extent that the speaker’s struggle is Everyman’s struggle, the listener can be brought to clarity and hope.”<sup>9</sup>

In the midst of a series on spiritual disciplines, I had an experience in which I sensed God speaking to me and changing me through my quiet time and the discipline of fasting. I debated whether or not to share the story with the congregation. I didn’t want to exalt my own spirituality, (remembering Jesus’ warnings about fasting “to be seen by men,”) nor was I eager to reveal an aspect of my character that was less than Christ-like. I ended up sharing the story, and listeners shared with me afterward that it helped them see how these disciplines actually worked in a person’s life, and inspired them to practice them with that kind of expectancy. I went home feeling a bit “overexposed” that day, but grateful that I was able to share with the congregation out of the genuineness of my own growing walk with God. Certainly, we must beware that the message never becomes about us. At the same time, we cannot be afraid, like Paul, to be our true selves and to live real lives, in order that listeners might “become imitators of us and of the Lord” (I Thessalonians 1:6).

### Emotion: Be Passionate

If our preaching is going to inspire and empower people, we must allow ourselves to feel and to express our emotional investment in our message and in their spiritual growth. People want to know how deeply we care for them, how passionate we are about truth, how angry we are about injustice, and how happy we are to be followers of Christ.

Paul reveals his heart for his mission and the people of Thessalonica at several points in his letter. He writes, “But we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us” (I Thessalonians 2:7-8). His affection and intensity is revealed again when he writes, “For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God” (I Thessalonians 2:11-12a).

Passion begins with the preacher’s awareness of his own emotional range and state. Visionary preachers aren’t afraid of their emotions; they allow themselves to feel and express them. Fred Craddock calls upon preachers to cultivate a “receptivity to the whole range of human emotions.”<sup>10</sup> That receptivity is cultivated through genuine engagement in human society and relationships, and appreciation for artistic explorations of the human experience through film, literature, and the fine arts.

Maintaining emotional health is obviously essential to a sustained preaching ministry, as it enables the preacher to express emotion appropriately, as well as to endure the emotional demands and drain of ministry. When the preacher is experiencing personal pain, it’s best to be honest with oneself and the congregation as it will inevitably

impact the tone and content of preaching. At times it will be helpful to preach from that pain, allowing both oneself and the congregation to experience the comfort and healing impact of God's Word. Other times, it may be necessary to take a break from the pulpit to allow oneself time to process the pain personally, and to allow the congregation to receive the teaching they need from a preacher who can be fully engaged and focused on the message of the morning.

In addition to a healthy self-awareness, the visionary preacher will also be alert to emotive elements in the text as she develops the message. While this will be more obvious in some texts than others, thoughtful consideration of the author's background, the literary genre, the occasion and purpose of the writing, and the surrounding context will usually reveal a distinct mood underlying the text. A sermon's content and delivery will be most effective when it is consistent with the emotional mood of the text.

Sometimes a single word in a text unlocks its emotional content. Paul's use of the word "cheerful," or, "hilarious," to describe the kind of giver God loves calls for a positive, even joyful tone to a message on giving from that text (2 Corinthians 9:7). If listeners don't have an opportunity to laugh in the course of that message, if they don't leave feeling happier about giving than when they came in, then the preacher has failed to exploit the visionary dimension of that text. Similarly, a message from a psalm of lament that doesn't trigger feelings of sorrow and loss in the listeners at some point in the message will fall short of its transformational potential. Those who hear the message may leave with an improved understanding of sorrow and loss, but will not have tasted the restorative power of God's Word and Spirit.

Sometimes those elements are already present in the text and simply need to be drawn out. Other times, the preacher will need to raise the emotional temperature of a message with illustrative content that engages people emotionally, i.e. moving stories, disturbing observations, or comic relief. Indeed, the emotional movement of the message ought to be as carefully crafted as the content outline. Preachers can bring energy to a message simply by moving about on the platform, gesturing broadly, increasing the pace of their delivery, and involving their whole body in the communication of the message. Stepping closer to the congregation, or even coming down from the platform when practical, can bring a heightened sense of intimacy and intensity to a portion of the message.

Finally, the visionary preacher will freely, but appropriately, reveal her passion for the material and the people in the delivery of the message. Every preacher needs to be aware of the “set” of his own countenance. Some people are natural smilers, others default to a more serious appearance. We can’t force ourselves or pretend to be something other than we are, but we can be intentional about broadening and balancing our natural tendencies with complementary ones. While I laugh easily in public, the general set of my face is more intense. My wife still has to smile conspicuously at me from the pew sometimes to remind me to lighten up! While we certainly don’t want to manufacture emotion in the pulpit, we don’t need to stifle it when it rises naturally or spontaneously. Nor should we be afraid to express publicly, from time to time, our love for the congregation and our delight in being their pastor. Such declarations not only strengthen the bond between preacher and congregation, they provide listeners with the security to take risks and explore new frontiers of spirituality. When the preacher



expresses her feelings appropriately and authentically, it gives the listeners permission to engage emotionally, as well, and experience more deeply the truth being proclaimed.

#### Uction: Be Ready

A final but indispensable aspect of the preacher as a person is the operation of the Holy Spirit in and through him. This elusive quality is sometimes identified as unction, or anointing.

Paul points to this divine operation in his ministry at Thessalonica when he writes, “our gospel came to you not only with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction” (I Thessalonians 1:5). He refers to it again when he observes that “you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit” (I Thessalonians 1:6). He is convinced that what happened as a result of their ministry in that city can only be explained supernaturally. Clearly, a force was at work that transcended anything he and his associates could have accomplished in their own strength.

Lee Eclov defines unction as “the anointing of the Holy Spirit on a sermon so that something holy and powerful is added to the message that no preacher can generate.”<sup>11</sup> While unction seems to defy analysis, we know it when we see it, hear it, and feel it. Sometimes the preacher is aware of the Spirit’s empowering work, but generally it is the congregation that recognizes the unmistakable and inescapable activity of the Spirit. Certainly, God’s Word never fails to accomplish the purpose for which it was given, even when it is proclaimed without obvious signs of divine activity (Isaiah 55:11). But when a message or messenger is anointed by God’s Spirit, the fruit of that ministry of the Word is abundant, dramatic, and lasting.

Having sought the Spirit's anointing throughout my ministry, I have come to believe that unction is like romance: it can't be forced, but it can be fanned into flame. A suitor can't command a woman's affection, but he can court her by creating opportunities for her to fall in love with him. A couple can't create chemistry if it isn't there, but they can cultivate it by attending to the health and vitality of their relationship.

Similarly, preachers can't demand or command unction, but they can cultivate a relationship with God that allows the Spirit to operate freely and fully in accordance with God's will. This begins with an awareness of the Spirit's indwelling presence (Romans 8:9), and a desire for the Spirit's fullness on an ongoing basis (Ephesians 5:18). It involves a vibrant devotional life, grounded in daily prayer and Bible reading (John 15:5-8), and enhanced by spiritual disciplines like fasting, solitude, silence, and rest (Mark 9:29; I Timothy 4:7-8). Anointing is also related to holy living, as God's Spirit is grieved by unrepentant sin and contentious relationships (Ephesians 4:30-31), and by careless stewardship of our bodies, minds, and resources (I Corinthians 6:19-20; Matthew 25:14-30). A pastor's personal relationships, including family and friendships, must be healthy and honorable if the Spirit is to operate unhindered in and through him (I Peter 3:7). None of these activities in particular, nor all of them together, can guarantee the Spirit's anointing when it comes time to step into the pulpit. But when attended to and practiced faithfully, they allow us to be available to the Spirit on an ongoing basis, and on those occasions when the Lord wants to do something special.

Personally, I have discovered a real and predictable correlation between the condition of my soul and my sense of the Spirit's empowering activity in my life, (though I use the word, "predictable" very tentatively regarding the Holy Spirit!) I've learned I

can't afford to let my daily devotional connection with God become routine or inconsistent. I have to maintain a zero-tolerance for known sin in my life. And when I do stumble, I can't allow much time to pass before coming to God in repentance. More than once I've had to make a phone call on a Saturday to seek reconciliation with a brother or sister in Christ, or have had to make amends with my wife or children, lest anything hinder the work of God's Spirit in and through me the next day. Perhaps my most treasured and fruitful spiritual pursuit has been the practice of taking a seasonal prayer and study retreat 3-4 times a year. Generally it is an overnight stay in a retreat center or borrowed vacation home that allows me to pray, fast, study, rest, and enjoy companionship with God. If too many months pass without such a retreat, my preaching feels lifeless, my vision becomes cloudy, and my soul begins to shrivel.

In my early years as a pastor, there was an elderly saint in the congregation we would occasionally call on to lead us in prayer during a worship service. Whatever else he might have prayed for, he never failed to conclude without asking God to grant me, the preacher, "unction from on high." I wasn't sure what it was, but I knew I needed it, and wanted it. And ultimately, wanting it may be the most critical factor when it comes to unction. Calvin Miller suggests that "the Spirit never comes as a result of sermon preparation; He comes as a result of the soul's desire."<sup>12</sup> Miller would be the first to call preachers to diligent preparation, but he is reminding us that there is a dimension to preaching that is beyond our control. Unction can't be worked; it can only be wanted. Visionary preachers want it every week.

## **Living The Life**

We have declared the goal of visionary preaching to be nothing less than the transformation of lives and congregations. We want them to become the people and churches God intends them to be. If that is to happen, they must be able to see, up close and personal, what they can become with God's help. Furthermore, they must believe that such a future is possible, even for ordinary people like them.

A preacher who is accessible, authentic, passionate, and anointed provides people with the example and encouragement they need to pursue God's better future. He allows people to "handle" God's truth by offering them a life they can get close to; a person they can shake hands with, rub shoulders with, and even bump into in the grocery store from time to time. Paul was that kind of preacher to the people at Thessalonica, with the result that they were radically transformed by the power of God. Paul testifies, "Your faith in God has become known everywhere....They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (I Thessalonians 1:8-9).

According to Dallas Willard, "What we really need are preachers who can stand in simplicity and manifest and declare the richness of life in Christ."<sup>13</sup> When mentoring younger pastors who want to become effective preachers, I find myself urging them, when all is said and done, to "Get a life!" – a growing, attractive, Christ-filled life, that they can live out in a community of Christ-followers and God-seekers. Such a life, lived and preached authentically and enthusiastically, can and will have transformational impact.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Clyde Fant, Preaching For Today (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975) 47.

<sup>2</sup> Phillips Brooks, Eight Lectures on Preaching (London: S.P.C.K., 1959) 8.

<sup>3</sup> Dallas Willard, A Cup Running Over, in The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching, eds. Craig Brian Larson and Haddon Robinson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 73.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Hybels, Courageous Leadership (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 40.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Craddock, Overhearing The Gospel (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978) 52.

<sup>6</sup> John Ortberg, “A Leader’s Greatest Fear,” Willow Creek Leadership Summit 2007, Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois, Aug 10, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Warren Wiersbe, “The Patented Preacher” in The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching, eds. Craig Brian Larson and Haddon Robinson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 77.

<sup>8</sup> Wiersbe, 78.

<sup>9</sup> Fred Craddock, Overhearing the Gospel, 50-51.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Craddock, As One Without Authority (Enid, OK: The Philips University Press, 1971) 86.

<sup>11</sup> Lee Eclov, “How Does Unction Function” in The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching, eds. Craig Brian Larson and Haddon Robinson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 81.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin Miller, Spirit, Word, and Story (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 37.

<sup>13</sup> Dallas Willard, “A Cup Running Over” 72.

## CHAPTER 8: APPLICATION

### “A GLIMPSE OF GLORY”

#### **A Fresh Approach**

The visionary model for preaching presented in this thesis is an approach I have “stumbled” into in my weekly attempts to communicate God’s Word with clarity, relevance, and impact. Over the years I have become more intentional about the approach, and have strengthened it with insights from my own experience and from other seasoned communicators. In this thesis I have formalized the approach and defined a model for preaching that I believe leads to transformation in the lives of people and congregations.

Visionary preaching empowers people to pursue God’s better future for their lives and churches by leveraging the transformative power of words, images, stories, and the person of the preacher. We have demonstrated that this approach to preaching emerges from Scripture itself, is grounded doctrinally in the *imago dei* and in God’s ultimate purposes for humankind, and is psychologically consistent with human behavior, intellect, and aspiration. The four elements of visionary preaching have been identified, explained, and applied to the weekly challenge of crafting and delivering expository messages. This final chapter will discuss the practical application of the model to the two primary tasks of the preacher – mission advancement and spiritual formation – and will then address objections that might be raised to the model.

## Preaching for Mission Advancement

Casting vision for the future of a church, ministry, or organization is a primary responsibility of pastoral leaders. Bill Hybels establishes the importance of vision when he writes:

Vision is at the very core of leadership....It's the energy that creates action. It's the fire that ignites the passion of followers. It's the clear call that sustains focused effort year after year, decade after decade, as people offer consistent and sacrificial service to God.<sup>1</sup>

The discernment and formulation of that vision is a challenge that lies outside the scope of this project. However, once that vision has been determined, it must be communicated in such a clear and compelling way that it inspires the congregation or constituency to embrace and pursue that future. No matter how worthy a vision might be, if it can't be understood, remembered, or acted upon easily it will never be achieved. Andy Stanley reminds us how important it is for pastors and leaders to communicate the vision in such a way that it "sticks:"

When it comes to making your vision stick, here is the most important thing to remember: *You are responsible....*We are all tempted at times to blame the people around us for their inability to understand and act on the vision we have cast. But...if the followers don't get it, we probably haven't delivered the vision in a way that makes it *get-able*.<sup>2</sup>

Not only is it essential to communicate the vision clearly at the outset, but it must be repeated and refreshed again and again for as long as the vision is relevant, since

“vision leaks.”<sup>3</sup> Communicating that vision clearly, consistently, and creatively, is one of the most daunting tasks facing a pastoral leader.

The congregation of sixty or so people that I pastored right out of seminary was vibrant and poised to grow, but not ready to embrace the changes that would be needed to grow, like adding a second service and using more contemporary music. One of the church growth books I read insisted that the first prerequisite for growth was that “the church must want to grow and be willing to pay the price.”<sup>4</sup> How would I get them to such a place?

As I floundered about for preaching texts and material that would help me make the case for growth, I found that narrative texts were more inspiring than didactic ones. While the congregation agreed with biblical mandates for growth, such as those found in Matthew 28:19-20 and Ephesians 4:1-16, it was a 10-week series from the opening chapters of Acts that inspired people to *want* to grow. The weekly stories of conversion, witness, prayer, service, generosity, and hospitality in the early church unleashed in the congregation a “holy discontent” with church-as-usual. I also found that when I told “success stories” from our own church’s ministry, it created an expectancy and hunger for more. When I painted word-pictures of Sunday School rooms overflowing with children, or of happy people spilling out of our doors onto Main St. every Sunday, they began to believe such things could actually happen, and began praying and serving as if they would. And when my wife and I demonstrated our commitment to outreach by bringing our neighbors to church, others found the courage to do the same thing. As I suggested earlier, these vision-casting efforts were more accidental than intentional, (I’m not sure “vision-casting” was even a word back then!), but as years went by I found



myself turning to these elements again and again when it came time to inspire and mobilize the congregation to new endeavors.

Most pastors coming out of seminary do not have experience or training in casting vision. Furthermore, most pastors do not identify leadership as one of their primary gifts.<sup>5</sup> Even pastors who are gifted in leadership find the task of casting vision throughout the year to be one of their most daunting assignments. The visionary preaching model provides pastors with a helpful and practical template for preaching for mission advancement. I have found four simple phrases to be helpful prompts for preparing a visionary message that will be clear, compelling, and memorable.

*Coin a Phrase* – This prompt reminds us of the power of words skillfully chosen, crafted, and delivered. If people are going to remember and repeat the vision, it needs to be articulated clearly and concisely; ideally, ten words or less that roll easily off the tongue and stick in the mind. This phrase will often, though not always, be a paraphrase or condensation of the homiletical idea. For instance, when calling the congregation at Grace Chapel to a renewed and thoroughgoing commitment to authentic group life, I used the phrase, “a Community of communities” to describe what our re-envisioned church would look like when the vision was achieved. Three years later we’re still using the phrase.

*Paint a Picture* – Using metaphor, word pictures, and/or visual arts, the visionary preacher will help people see what the new reality will look like when it is achieved. Never underestimate the power of people’s imaginations. All they need are a few simple but vivid descriptions of an event, a building, or even a concept in order to be able to picture it in their minds.

In order to help the people of North Point Church understand their ministry model, Andy Stanley and his team refer to three “environments” for ministry: the Foyer, where people are welcomed and made to feel at home; the Living Room, where people begin to build relationships and feel like they belong; and the Kitchen, where people are truly themselves and share life and faith together. These environments correspond to certain services, events, and ministries in the church. Stanley not only describes these environments vividly and often, they are also made visual through sets and logos.<sup>6</sup>

*Tell a Story* – By bringing biblical stories to life with drama and warmth, or by sharing stories gleaned from literature, history, personal experience, or from the life of the church itself, preachers can inspire people to give, serve, or change in pursuit of a new vision. When Paul Atwater, Senior Pastor of North River Community Church in Pembroke, Massachusetts, was raising funds for the church’s first permanent home, he told a compelling story. He crafted a narrative around the prime piece of land they were looking at, describing how it had been providentially preserved from development from the time the Pilgrims first landed in nearby Plymouth hundreds of years earlier. And now, their church had the opportunity to be its first occupants! Who wouldn’t want to give to that!?!?

*Live it Out* – This prompt calls on the preacher to embody the particular change or vision that she is communicating. When challenging people to participate in a capital campaign, for instance, the preacher must be prepared to share publicly some aspect of her financial participation in the campaign. If the culture of the church does not permit her to share the specific amount she is committing, then she must at least share the

spiritual journey that led to a financial decision, so the congregation knows how to make that journey, as well.

In addition to these four prompts that correspond with the key elements of visionary preaching, I have found one other to be helpful in the crafting and delivery of messages for mission advancement: *Use the Bible!* While this would seem to be an obvious element of any sermon, pastors can be tempted to preach for mission advancement out of their own visionary spirit and imagination, (or worse, someone else's), with only a perfunctory or proof-texting nod to the Scripture. I have found it to be important to ground the vision I am preaching clearly and thoroughly in a biblical text, properly understood.

When we were imagining a new Community Life Center for our church, and I was facing the task of calling the congregation to philosophical and financial commitments to the project, I asked the Lord for clear confirmation of the vision in Scripture. After prayer and reflection, I found my way to the early chapters of Acts, where we read that the evangelistic expansion of the church was fueled by a vibrant community life at its center in Jerusalem. As I described that winsome, powerful, grace-filled life “on display” in Solomon’s Colonnade, I was able to help people visualize a similar life overflowing from our new community space. When visionary messages are grounded in the Scripture, we are able to preach them with biblical authority and clarity, and we guard against championing our own agenda.

There are a variety of times and occasions throughout the life of the church when the pastor is called upon to preach for mission advancement. Whenever it is time for the church or organization to embark on a new initiative or to embrace a significant change,

visionary preaching is required. Some of the more obvious occasions involve building projects or stewardship campaigns. Ideally, initiatives of this magnitude will call for a series of messages, in which the four elements of visionary preaching might be employed over the course of the series. If there is only opportunity for one message, the preacher will be wise to work all four into the message, or as many as possible, in order to increase “stickiness.”

However, there are many other occasions for vision-casting messages that are often overlooked in the life of a church. I grew up in a church that held a yearly missions conference. Typically, the conference would include guest speakers who would make a biblical case for overseas missions or report on what God was doing around the world. These messages were often informative, and sometimes quite colorful. But it all seemed quite – dare I say it – distant. Rarely did anyone help me see where these missionary stories intersected with my story, other than to give or pray. We saw countless slides from faraway places, but no one ever put me in the picture. The themes were predictable and unimaginative, e.g. “Till the Whole World Knows,” etc. While the senior pastor obviously believed in what our missionaries were doing around the world, rarely did he deliver the keynote message and help us to see and feel how we could be part of God’s global, cross-cultural enterprise. Globally-minded pastors would do well to preach such empowering, visionary messages at least once or twice a year.

Most churches have a traditional start to their ministry year, most often either September or January. This is an important occasion for the pastor to articulate the church’s vision or focus for the coming year. (This assumes there *is* a strategic focus to the year, but that’s a subject for another time!) I have traditionally done this on the first

Sunday after Labor Day, which in the northeast usually coincides with the first week of school and the beginning of our church year. We designate it Vision Sunday, and I have become very intentional about crafting messages that employ all four visionary elements (See Appendix A). Andy Stanley strategically preaches vision in January, when people in his part of the country are most faithful in attendance, and in May, in conjunction with ministry recruitment for the following year.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to these big moments, savvy pastors will be alert to other opportunities throughout the year to advance the mission through visionary preaching, e.g. the Sunday before Vacation Bible School begins. These don't always have to be stand-alone messages, singularly focused on one initiative or event. The thoughtful preacher can plan his preaching calendar with such occasions in mind, selecting texts and/or supporting material that will provide a vision-casting moment in the context of a larger message or series. Such moments not only create awareness and momentum for an upcoming ministry, they breathe value and passion into the staff and volunteers who are making it happen, helping them to see how their service advances the vision of the church and God's eternal purposes.

### **Preaching for Spiritual Formation**

As I became more comfortable with the visionary elements and more intentional about developing them, I found myself looking forward to the next opportunity to preach a visionary message in support of our mission. Capital campaigns and ministry launchings became some of my favorite occasions to preach, because I had a model that was practical, effective, and well-received by the congregation. Suddenly it dawned upon me that I didn't need an "excuse" to preach a visionary message, but could preach

this way on a regular basis. If words, images, stories, and the person of the preacher were so effective in effecting organizational change, why not put them to work to effect spiritual growth? If people responded so enthusiastically when offered a compelling vision for their church, why not offer them a compelling vision for their life? Like many preachers, I tended to think of vision too narrowly, and to preach vision too infrequently.

In recent years, I have discovered the joy and effectiveness of inspiring people to pursue God's better future for their lives. God's vision for our lives is that we would be "conformed to the likeness of His Son" (Romans 8:29), and that we might "live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, [and] being strengthened with all power" (Colossians 1:10-11). Such a life must be possible for us, or God wouldn't have called us to it!

Furthermore, I believe people want to live that kind of life. Seekers who are far from God still yearn for meaning, love, purpose, and eternity. The *imago dei* cannot be snuffed out, but flashes into expression even under the most harsh circumstances and in the most godless environments. Believers *want* to grow in their faith, to be more like Christ, and to glorify God in their work, their family life, and in every aspect of their being. When people are presented with a clear, compelling, and believable vision of the person they can become in Christ, they find themselves inspired and empowered to embrace that vision.

Because of sin and ignorance, that vision needs to be awakened. Most people have become so disheartened by their failures, or so discouraged by the harsh realities of life, they can't see a better day. Others have such a warped view of God and Christianity that they can't imagine life could be better with Christ. Some, of course, have never even

heard the news of a God who loves them, who desires relationship with them, and has a good and eternal purpose for their lives.

Enter the visionary preacher! When the Word of God is communicated in the power of the Spirit and the strength of word, image, story, and person, hearers can respond with repentance and faith, and begin to become the people they were created to be, and deep in their hearts have always wanted to be.

Jesus employed such an approach when he told his followers they were nothing less than the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and that their lives could be so attractive they would cause pagans to praise God (Matthew 5:13-16). He captured their attention and imagination with carefully crafted words and phrases, like “fishers of men” and “the last shall be first” (Mark 1:17; 10:31). He told parables that illustrated the intersection of their stories with the Story of the Kingdom (Mark 4). He lived the life of the Kingdom before them with the expectation that they could and would live it, too (John 13:12-16). Here were common people – fishermen, tax-collectors, homemakers – invited to become world-changers!

The apostle Paul often took a visionary approach in his preaching and writing. With intriguing words like “mystery” and “in Christ” he opened people’s minds to new realities (Ephesians 3:1-10). He used metaphors and extended word pictures to stimulate believers to spiritual growth; “run in such a way as to win the prize” (I Corinthians 9:24), and “Put on the full armor of God...” (Ephesians 6:11). Often he told the story of his conversion and stories from the Scripture to enliven and energize his preaching (Acts 22:1-21). He shared himself so completely and transparently that he dared to write, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (I Corinthians 11:1).

Preachers are in good company when they employ these same elements in developing people into fully-devoted followers of Christ. Visionary preaching need not be reserved for mission advancement, but is equally effective in calling people to spiritual maturity and growth in Christ-likeness. A few simple steps woven into the pastor's weekly preparation will increase the visionary impact of the preacher's discipling ministry.

*Punch up the big idea.* When formulating a proposition or big idea, apply the same word-smithing rigor one would apply when formulating an organizational mission statement or a slogan for a capital campaign. Keep working with it until it is so simple, clear, and memorable that it could be recited at gunpoint! If the homiletical idea requires more than a handful of words, then find a "sticky" word or phrase from the idea that people can take home with them. In a powerful message on the mortification of sin, John Piper charges his listeners again and again to "Kill it!"<sup>8</sup> The violence of that word, along with the surprise of hearing a pastor use it, makes an unforgettable impression upon the listener.

*Pay attention to titles.* An intriguing and well-crafted title creates expectancy in the listener, and can conjure up an image, emotion, or story-line that engages the listener before the preacher has even opened her mouth. A title like, "The Jekyll and Hyde of Motherhood"<sup>9</sup> immediately creates an intersection between the familiar Gothic tale and every mother's story. "Killing the Red Lizard"<sup>10</sup> evokes an irresistible visual engagement in the message, while "The Muchness of God"<sup>11</sup> leverages the memorability of clever word-play.



*Look for controlling metaphors.* A series or sermon gains visionary potential when it is linked to a master image that can be explored and remembered. Rob Bell has created a series of video messages that take a single word and explore it's metaphorical spiritual significance. For instance, in a video message entitled "Flame," Bell presents a biblical view of sexuality, in all it's wonder and danger, all the while building and igniting a bonfire.<sup>12</sup>

During our church's year-long emphasis on Transformation, I preached a series of eight messages designed to instruct and inspire people in the practice of spiritual disciplines. Looking for an overarching image that would give coherence, practicality, and interest to the series, I decided to work with the current home-redesign craze. There are at least a dozen popular cable shows teaching people how to transform their home, apartment, or room into a space that is more attractive, welcoming, and efficient. I called the series, *Interior ReDesign: Making Space for God*. The first four weeks we "emptied" our interiors, i.e., our souls, by practicing the disciplines of simplicity, stillness, silence, and solitude. In the second half of the series we "refurnished" by welcoming the Spirit, the Scripture, prayer, and community into the space we had created. The controlling metaphor helped to translate abstract concepts like "soul," and intimidating practices like "silence," into concrete images and do-able practices. It also provided a wealth of opportunities for connection, illustration, application, and humor.

*Look for meta-narratives.* Just as a powerful metaphor can give shape and clarity to spiritual realities, so an over-arching story can provide a sense of movement and progress to a sermon or series on spiritual growth. A captivating story at the beginning of a message not only wins attention, it invites listeners to find themselves in the story, thus

shaping the way they experience the rest of the sermon. Meta-narratives become even more compelling in an *inclusio* structure, where the introduction sets the narrative in motion, but resolution is delayed until the conclusion of the message.

Meta-narratives also communicate the idea that spiritual formation is an ongoing process, with all the drama and surprise of any good story. I taught a discipling series from the life of Abraham entitled, *Journey of a Lifetime: Following Abraham in the Footsteps of Faith*. The seven-week series unfolded as chapters in a story, giving listeners the freedom to imagine their own spiritual journey as a story, also.

*Create a campaign.* Capital campaigns are so effective because they engage the congregation on a variety of levels, and allow them not just to learn but to experience the biblical truths of prayer, giving, sacrifice, and faith. In addition to the messages from the pulpit, such campaigns typically involve public testimonies in print or from the platform, Sunday School or small group curriculum that parallels the messages, and a response opportunity at the end that allows people to take a step in a new spiritual direction.

In recent years many churches have discovered that these same elements and principles can be applied to spiritual growth campaigns. The *40 Days of Purpose* and *40 Days of Community* campaigns produced by Saddleback Church have not only been transformational experiences for many churches, they have inspired churches to create their own campaigns around a spiritual theme relevant to their congregation.

One year we were eager to help our people gain a grander vision for the significance of their working lives. Instead of seeing their daily work as an obstacle or hindrance to their spiritual growth and ministry, we wanted them to see their work as an expression of their God-given destiny and as an arena for their spiritual growth. We

created a series called, *ReImagine Work*, centered on four messages on the subject of work and the purposes of God. An artistic person in the congregation created life-sized silhouette figures of working people, e.g. a construction worker in a hardhat, a student with a laptop, etc. The mere presence of these images in the sanctuary delivered a message about the sacredness of work. In addition to the weekly expository message, each service included interviews or faith stories involving people from a variety of vocations. We created a Bible study guide that people could work through on their own, to supplement the sermons. We also provided Break-outs according to vocational categories during the traditional Sunday School hours, so people could interact with the weekly teaching themes in the company of people who worked in a similar industry, profession, or calling. Many people reported they had never appreciated how valuable their work was to God, nor how integral it was to their growth as followers of Christ.

Too many preachers labor under the mistaken idea that by simply imparting biblical truth to people, they will grow. Certainly, a knowledge of God's Word is essential to spiritual health, and God's Word *will* bear fruit in the lives of those who hear it. But visionary preachers recognize that it is rarely a lack of biblical knowledge that keeps people from growing spiritually. More often it is a lack of desire, or courage, or faith, or hope. The visionary preaching model is designed to awaken desire, to inflame faith, to fill with courage, and to inspire hope. Walter Bruggeman writes:

I have found myself discovering that mostly I do not need more advice, but strength. I do not need new information, but the courage, freedom, and authorization to act on what I already have been given in the gospel....The dry places in our lives – places of resistance and embrace – are not ultimately reached

by instruction...[but] *by stories, images, metaphors, and phrases* that line out the world differently – apart from our fear and hurt.<sup>13</sup>

Visionary preaching reaches those dry places, and floods them the courage, freedom, and faith, empowering people into that venture into that newly lined-out world, in accordance with God's good and eternal purposes.

### **Objections Addressed**

#### Is Visionary Preaching *truly* expository preaching?

In an edition of *Preaching Today Audio*, Michael Easley, a former pastor and current president of Moody Bible Institute, expresses concern over the decline in expository preaching in evangelical churches today.<sup>14</sup> He finds many pastors giving inspirational talks and self-help messages sprinkled with a selection of biblical texts that are disconnected, undeveloped, and out-of-context. Others have complained that fascination with technology has eclipsed the fascination with God's Word, and that cleverness has trumped scholarship as a requirement of good preaching. Is the visionary preaching model, with its emphasis on pithy phrases, visual imagery, storytelling, and personality yet another departure from biblical exposition?

Let's return to Haddon Robinson's widely-accepted definition of expository preaching:

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in it's context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers.<sup>15</sup>

Notice that the definition begins with the demand for *communication* of a biblical concept. Visionary preaching is not satisfied with the mere impartation of biblical content, as if the preacher's responsibility is simply to verbalize biblical ideas. Much of what passes for expository preaching today is merely expository *talking*; it doesn't communicate. The visionary preacher is committed to the skillful use of words, images, and stories because they are essential to effective communication, as has already been shown. These elements are not optional add-ons to spice up biblical content, but rather are the means by which that content finds its way to the heads and hearts of the hearers.

Secondly, the definition calls for the thorough and scholarly exegesis of a *biblical concept*. Visionary preachers may take a topical or thematic approach to their message, but the message itself is always drawn from and developed through a responsible handling of a text or texts. Rigorous study is essential, since the model is based upon the premise that visionary elements emerge from the text itself. Without *grammatical and literary study*, the word-pictures embedded in the text might never be discovered. If the preacher doesn't pay attention to the *context* of a passage, she might miss the story-line that heightens the text's impact. While the wording of the homiletical idea is carefully crafted, it is first of all a faithful and accurate expression of the exegetical idea.

Thirdly, that truth must be *applied to* and *experienced by* the preacher in order for it to be accessible to his hearers. The model we have proposed recognizes and elevates this essential aspect of expository preaching. A sermon may be thoroughly biblical and exegetically sound, but if it has not impacted the soul of the preacher it can be explained, but not explicated. And if the hearers are not able to discern its impact on the preacher, they may never understand how it can and should impact their own souls. The unction,

or anointing, called for in the model demands the operation of the *Holy Spirit* in the preacher's preparation, delivery, and living out of the message.

Finally, according to the definition, preaching is expository when the biblical concept has been *applied to the hearers*. The elements of visionary preaching are designed to facilitate that application by making the message clear, vivid, memorable, and accessible. The model is intentionally designed to move beyond information and exhortation to transformation in the lives of listeners.

While the expository nature of visionary preaching has been established, several cautionary questions can ensure that the message remains biblically grounded:

*Does the idea emerge from the text?* Since visionary preaching calls for imagination, and visionary thinking tends to be creative and fresh, preachers must resist the tendency to preach their own ideas or agendas sprinkled with a few biblical texts. This will demand responsible exegetical work, done *early* in the preparation process, so that the text controls the content and flow of the message. This is especially important when working with narrative passages, since it is easy to use a story illustratively without doing the hard work of exegesis. Frequent and specific references to the text throughout the message will keep both the speaker and the hearers grounded in the Scripture. It is a helpful safeguard generally to build a series around a book of the Bible, or portion of a book, rather than to piece together a variety of disconnected texts.

*Do any of the elements overwhelm the text?* When all is said and done, we want to facilitate encounters with God's Word, not ours. If the elements are so vivid or disturbing or numerous or lengthy that they overshadow the biblical content, we forfeit the divine power that resides in the Scripture.

Visionary preachers have such respect for the power of words, images, stories, and personalities, that they handle them with care and restraint. If a disturbing image or story is used to set-up a message or movement, the biblical content must developed effectively enough to resolve the tension. If the preacher illustrates with an extended story from his own life, he will want to direct the listener's attention back to Christ before he is done. The elements are meant to serve the text, not to provide the preacher with an excuse to show-off his creativity, tell a favorite story, or call attention to himself.

*Could any of the elements lead in wrong directions?* Images, metaphors, and stories are intriguing to work with because they are evocative; they stimulate the imagination and prompt us to consider a text or idea in a fresh way. The danger is that our imaginations can take us places Scripture does not. The preacher must be careful to establish boundaries around metaphorical reflection and to clarify the interpretation of a narrative. Sometimes the preacher will have to draw on other texts to line out the parameters.

In a series on personal evangelism drawn from gospel narratives, I used mountain climbing as a controlling metaphor for the series. There is an abundance of biblical imagery and narrative involving mountains as places of encounter with God, and people naturally think of the spiritual journey as an upward one. The metaphor provided us with a wealth of illustrative possibilities, e.g. reach out to lost climbers, use the guidebook, etc. At the same time, we had to clearly and repeatedly dispel the notion that there are “many routes” to the top. Each week I explicitly declared that while there are many routes up the mountain, there's only one that will take you all the way to the top. Gospel narratives

had to be subject to gospel declaratives, e.g. “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

### Is Visionary Preaching a capitulation to culture?

In his introduction to, *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, Scott Gibson surveys spiritual and philosophical trends confronting preachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, e.g. religious pluralism, moral relativism, epistemological skepticism, etc. He contends that “preachers have choices to make: engage the culture, ignore the culture, capitulate to the culture, or even challenge it.”<sup>16</sup> Is visionary preaching, with its emphasis on imagination and personal engagement, a capitulation to that culture? Is the preference for visualcy and narrative a compromising accommodation to an entertainment-oriented society? Are we dumbing-down the message with stories and illustrations in order to appeal to a biblically-illiterate audience?

Perhaps we should ask if Jesus was capitulating to his culture when he told stories drawn from the marketplace or the farmer’s field? Was Paul compromising his message when he affirmed the Athenian philosophers, or quoted contemporary poets, or drew illustrations from the athletic contests of the day? Was Ezekiel merely entertaining the crowd when he lay on his side for 390 days to make a point? Throughout the Scripture we find prophets, evangelists, apostles, and Jesus Himself speaking the language of the people, engaging the culture in which they found themselves, and employing a variety of means and mediums to communicate their God-given message. We have already demonstrated that Scripture itself effectively uses words, images, stories, and human personalities to reveal God’s truth. (See Chapter 2).



Certainly, visionary preaching seizes opportunities presented by contemporary culture through the responsible use of literary, visual, narrative, and personal elements. Jeffrey Arthurs affirms that a dialogical, sensory, and disclosive style of preaching connects well with a postmodern mindset.<sup>17</sup> However, its effectiveness derives from its grounding in God's timeless truth and from its understanding of human intellect and psychology. It is well-suited to a postmodern context, but not governed by postmodern assumptions.

Nevertheless, a couple of cautionary questions must guide the preparation of visionary messages:

*What's driving the use of a visionary element?* The preacher will do well to examine her motives and reasoning behind the use of a particular element in the message. Visionary preachers rightfully cultivate their imaginative power and make themselves students of contemporary culture. However, they must beware the temptation to use an element simply "because it's there;" that is, because they are fascinated by it, or because it's timely, or because they know the crowd will enjoy it. Far too often I encounter preachers so enamored with culture or media that they include music videos, movie clips, and elaborate sets, simply because "they can." Instead of enhancing the message and driving home the biblical truth, they distract from it, or even obscure it. Preachers must ask themselves if the use of an element is being driven by a creative impulse, or by a desire to communicate a truth in the most effective way possible.

For two years I have been intrigued by the pop song, "Unwritten," which was referenced in Chapter 6. It was, and still is, an immensely popular song that speaks of the human yearning to write new and better chapters to the stories of our lives. Again and

again I have attempted to work it into a message, but have never been able to do so with a sense of biblical integrity. While working on an Easter message out of Matthew 28, it struck me that the women who came to the tomb that morning thought they knew how Jesus' story would end – with a proper burial and a few words of remembrance. That's how every crucifixion story ended. Instead, they discovered that God had a different and better ending in mind for Jesus' story. And, as they and the disciples would soon discover, He had a better ending in mind for their stories, too. That text provided a sound and strategic opportunity to use a music video of the song, *Unwritten*, in order to engage people visually, verbally, and emotionally, and to bring to the surface each person's curiosity about the next chapter in their stories.

*Is there a propositional truth behind the visionary element?* While a postmodern audience will not be impressed by appeals to truth claims or biblical authority, the visionary preacher dare not abandon either. Our message is drawn from a book that claims to be “God-breathed and...useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). Our faith is centered in One who said of himself “I am the way, and the truth, and the life”(John 14:6). Stories, images, and personal testimonies can win a hearing for the gospel, but that gospel rests on eternal truths and historical realities. Every visionary message must clearly communicate, at some point, the propositional truths, doctrinal affirmations, and/or empirical evidence on which that message is founded. Scott Gibson challenges contemporary preachers not to apologize for or retreat from biblical authority in an anti-authority age. Rather, he challenges them to “cultivate theological discernment” that will enable them to assess, engage, and confront the culture.<sup>18</sup>

The song, “Unwritten,” as mentioned above, provides the visionary preacher with a creative way to engage contemporary culture. It is a “true” song, in the sense that it identifies a deep-seated and universal human longing. However, it is not a “truth” song, because it suggests that a person can write whatever story they want for their lives simply by opening themselves to experiences, releasing their inhibitions, and “reaching for something in the distance.”<sup>19</sup> The preacher who uses such a song will need to confront the fallacy behind it, and point listeners to the only Author who can write a better ending to their stories.

#### Is Visionary Preaching gospel-lite?

Health-and-wealth preachers continue to assure people that God has physical and material blessings in store for them if they will only believe and receive. Preachers from more liberal theological traditions affirm the inherent human capacity to create a better self and a better world. Critics accuse mega-church pastors of preaching a gospel that is more pop-psychology and self-help than repentance and faith. Is visionary preaching, with its positive tone and appeal to human aspiration, a declension from the true gospel that calls people to deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Christ?

Let’s begin by reminding ourselves of the grand and glorious possibilities that God has extended to people throughout history. He created the first man and woman with the expectation that they would reflect His image, that they would enjoy sexual and relational oneness, that they would be fruitful in bearing children, and that they would subdue the entire earth (Genesis 1-2). He promised Abraham that he would be great, that he would be the father of many descendants, and that he would be a channel of blessing to the entire world (Genesis 12:1-3). He promised the children of Israel that if they

remained faithful to Him they would be blessed with life and peace and prosperity (Deuteronomy 30:11-20). Even after the nation turned away and sinned horribly, God offered them restoration and the opportunity to be a great nation once again (Joel 2). We understand that these temporal blessings were offered to particular individuals and a chosen nation, and that the temporal blessings were, in large part, a foretaste of eternal and spiritual blessings yet to come. At the same time, they testify that God's vision for human beings is that they should experience, reflect, and extend His glory through their lives here on earth.

In the New Testament, we learn that God's blessings are, indeed, spiritual and eternal. Yet, still, they are full of promise and possibility for those who trust and obey. Jesus said, "I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). And while he assures his followers of hardship and persecution, he also assures them that, through faith in him, they can overcome hardship, endure persecution, and enjoy rewards in this life and the life to come (John 16:33; Matthew 5:10-12; Mark 10:29-30).

Similarly, Paul informs believers that they were created, even destined, to do good works (Ephesians 2:10). In the face of adversity and suffering, they can expect Christ to be glorified in them (2 Corinthians 4:7-18). He invites them to "take hold of the life that is truly life," in this age and the age to come (1 Timothy 6:19). Peter assures his readers that their faith will be proved genuine, that they will live good lives that point people toward God, and that they will glorify God even when they suffer (1 Peter 1:7; 2:12; 4:12-14).

We are on solid biblical ground when we help people grasp God's grand vision for their lives. To be sure, it is not a vision for health and wealth, but it is a vision of

glory and goodness. It is the vision of a future far more meaningful, satisfying, and significant than anything they might have imagined. God's vision for our future is better than our vision, even when it includes hardship, suffering, and loss.

Visionary preachers are not afraid to preach the "hard sayings" of Scripture. Nor do they shrink from confronting the demands of the gospel and the harsh realities of life. On the contrary, they seize such texts and trials as opportunities to lift people's vision; to help them recognize the significance of their decisions and the God-honoring, soul-satisfying possibilities inherent in every human experience.

One of the most transformational series I have ever preached was out of the Beatitudes. It was entitled, "Change of Heart," and explored the inner qualities that Jesus pronounces, "Blessed" (Matthew 5:1-12). They were hardly feel-good messages. The first three messages called people to cultivate desperate hearts – "Blessed are the poor in spirit;" broken hearts – "Blessed are those who mourn;" and surrendered hearts – "Blessed are the meek." It was a visionary series in that it called people to become Christ-like people from the inside-out. At the same time, it called people to repentance, humility, and dependence on God.

Again, guiding questions will guard against a drift toward health-and-wealth, self-help preaching and away from the harder truths of Scripture.

*Are we preaching the whole counsel of God?* Since visionary preaching is expository, by definition, it must draw from the breadth and depth of biblical truth. An intentional preaching calendar that draws upon the various literary genres of Scripture will help to ensure a balanced perspective on God's vision for our lives and churches. While narrative passages lend themselves to a visionary approach, the didactic portions

of Scripture will keep those visions grounded theologically and propositionally. While visionary preachers have a bias for positive texts that affirm our potential in Christ, they must also sound the warnings and correctives offered by more prophetic passages. It is a helpful discipline, from time to time, to look back over the previous year's preaching and analyze both the tone and content of the messages and the series in that period to ensure a balanced diet.

*Are we preaching to the whole congregation?* As important as it is to intentionally exposit the breadth and depth of Scripture, it is equally important to intentionally address the breadth and depth of human experience. Preachers, in general, can become myopic in their vision, drawing too heavily from their own life-stage and experience, and speaking to the circle of people they tend to relate to in the congregation. Visionary preachers, in particular, can be so future-focused that they overlook the current realities their listeners and congregations are facing.

The challenge of relating to the entire congregation varies with the size of the church. In larger churches, pastors tend to spend most of their time with leaders and core members, and can lose touch with the spiritual needs and perspective of struggling seekers and believers who are hiding in the crowd. In smaller churches, the opposite often happens. Pastors become the primary care-givers for hurting and troubled people and don't spend enough time with leaders and folks who are eager and ready to grow.

The visionary preacher will be intentional about spending time with different kinds of people, including seekers, and will be attentive to the questions being raised in hallway conversations and emails. In addition, preachers who read widely, listen to popular music, go to the movies, and develop an appreciation for the fine arts will

sensitize themselves to the variety and depth of human experience that may lie outside their personal experience.

One year our pastoral staff sensed that there seemed to be an unusual number of people in the congregation experiencing hardship, disappointment, and grief. Wanting to speak redemptively into their experience, we scrapped the teaching series we had planned, and decided to explore 2 Corinthians. This letter was written out of Paul's experiences with hardship and persecution, yet it abounds with the promise and possibility of growth and glory even through such circumstances. We designed a series entitled, "Unbreakable: Jars of Clay in a Crash-Bang World," in which we considered texts dealing with hardship, grief, suffering, temptation, and pain. As the title suggests, the messages did not dismiss or minimize these realities, but rather called people to courage and confidence in the face of them, through Christ.

#### Is Visionary Preaching for everybody?

At a seminar in which I was presenting the visionary preaching model, one pastor wondered aloud if this approach to preaching was best-suited to preachers of a particular gift-mix or personality-type. He described himself as more of a teacher, whose training and temperament were better suited to a more cerebral, informational approach to preaching. Others might find themselves more comfortable speaking from a prophetic or therapeutic stance, by virtue of their training, or context, or gifting. Interestingly, surveys have revealed that many pastors do not consider leadership to be one of their strongest gifts, and would not describe themselves as "visionary."<sup>20</sup> Can a visionary approach to preaching be learned and implemented by *any* preacher, regardless of their training, temperament, or gift-mix? And should it be?

I believe that any preacher can improve the effectiveness and the impact of his preaching by applying the principles of visionary preaching. It has already been demonstrated that this approach to proclaiming God's truth is consistent with much of the proclamation modeled by the prophets, the apostles, and Jesus Himself. (See Chapter 2). The purpose of this project has been to identify the key elements operative in this approach, explain the dynamics behind their effectiveness, and to equip pastors and communicators to integrate these elements into their speaking ministry.

We have shown that most of these visionary elements emerge from the text itself, and can be discovered through exegetical and reflective engagement with the text. Creative genius is not required! The first step in strengthening the visionary effective of messages is simply to look for and work with the words, images, and story-lines that are already there. In the exegetical phase of preparation, the preacher might simply make columns in his notes and take inventory of these elements. A fourth column might identify the aspects of the text that resonate with the preacher on a personal level.

Once those elements have been identified, the brainstorming phase begins, in which the preacher "freely-associates" those elements with songs, movies, artwork, historical events and characters, current events, and her own life experiences. I find one "Ideas" page to be adequate for stimulating and recording such ideas and connections. I recommend beginning this page before working with commentaries, so the text is able to speak for itself. Once the research begins, keep it handy and add to it freely. Any one of the words or images discovered can be searched on the web, and will surface a plethora of further ideas and connections. This phase will also include further personal reflection on the speaker's experiences with the truth being explored, or on recent conversations



with people or staff members that might bring specificity and immediacy to the ideas. To be sure, the more widely-read and intellectually-curious and culturally-engaged the preacher is, the more likely she is to stumble upon such connections. But even these qualities can be easily cultivated by the preacher eager to become more visionary in her approach.

The selection and development of visionary elements, along with the narrative structuring of the message, are skills that can be developed with practice. I learned storytelling techniques working children in an Awana ministry! Informationally-oriented preachers may have to omit some exegetical detail in order to allow for development of an image or a story. Exhortational preachers might discipline themselves to avoid words like, “should,” “ought,” and “must” in order to create a more visionary tone to the message. Introverts might have to stretch themselves a bit to share personal experiences from the pulpit, (though I have discovered that most preachers, even visionary ones, tend toward the introversion side of the scale.) The preacher who is just beginning to explore these elements might select two or three Sundays a year to preach visionary messages.

Visionary principles don’t require a preacher to abandon his preferred mode of preaching, or to re-invent her personality. Indeed, a key aspect of visionary preaching is for the preacher to be true to himself! However, any message will be strengthened by the inclusion of visionary elements, and any preacher can become more skilled and comfortable preaching from a visionary stance. Certain seasons of the year and certain themes and texts will lend themselves more easily to a visionary approach. Even those comfortable with and committed to a visionary approach will need to vary their style and content throughout the course of the year.

Preachers who are wondering if they need to develop a more visionary style would do well to ask themselves, and some listeners and peers, a few diagnostic questions:

*Are people attentive throughout the message?*

*Do they need to take notes or fill in blanks in order to follow the message or remember its truth?*

*Are they bringing friends to church, or buying CD's to share with friends?*

*Are unsaved, unchurched people attracted to the preaching, and are they able to follow it?*

*Are people being changed as a result of the preaching ministry?*

The goal of preaching is nothing less than the transformation of hearts, minds, and lives. Visionary preaching is not satisfied with the impartation of knowledge, or the exhortation to do better, or the rebuking of bad behavior, or the comforting of those in distress. Each of these are worthy goals, but fall short of the life-changing potential inherent in any and every proclamation of God's Word. Visionary preachers believe that their work is not done until listeners have been empowered to pursue God's better future by hearing, seeing, feeling, and touching God's grand vision for their lives.

### **Turning the Lights On**

At the outset of this project, we grounded the model in Paul's prayer for the saints in Ephesus, "that the eyes of your hearts would be enlightened" (Ephesians 1:18). Paul obviously believed that if believers could "see" God's truth, if they could envision what God had in mind for them, they would be on their way to knowing by experience "the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and

his incomparably great power for us who believe” (Ephesians 1:18-19). Visionary preaching is committed to opening people’s spiritual eyes to God’s good and eternal vision for their lives and churches.

In *Leadership Journal*, Skye Jethani describes a tourist attraction in Ravenna, Italy. The mausoleum of Galla Placida was built by a Roman emperor for his sister 1500 years ago. The mausoleum is famous for its vaulted ceiling that features a mosaic portrait of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

However, when visitors step into the mausoleum and look up, all they see is darkness. The room is kept dark in order to preserve the brilliant colors of the tiles. But every few minutes, spotlights come on and illuminate the ceiling for a few seconds. And in those few seconds visitors are afforded a glimpse of Jesus, faithfully tending the flock under His care. The sheep are safe under his watchful eye, peacefully at rest amid green pastures and quiet waters. The scene is made all the more vivid set against a deep blue sky, sprinkled with stars. The sight is so striking, so comforting, and so inspiring, that the crowd gasps each time it is illumined. Then, they wait, patiently, expectantly, for one more glimpse of the heavenly vision.

Preaching is like that. Jethani writes:

We live in a dark world. Our hearts long for goodness, beauty, justice, and peace, but they are often hidden behind the shadow cast by evil and sin....Whenever the kingdom of God is proclaimed, it is like a bright burst of light. In those brief moments, we are given a glimpse of a world behind the darkness. It is a sublime vision that reorders our perception of reality and leaves us hungry for more.<sup>21</sup>

Every week, seekers and believers flock to our churches, bringing their darkness with them. They take their places, and wait; hoping that someone will turn the lights on, even for a moment, and grant them a vision of a life and world better than the one they are experiencing. Visionary preachers seize those moments, proclaiming God's Word in such a way that people are able to see, believe, and embrace God's better future for their lives and congregations.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bill Hybels, Courageous Leadership (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 31.

<sup>2</sup> Andy Stanley, Making Vision Stick (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 17, author's emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Andy Stanley, "Vision Leaks," Leadership Journal, 25.1 (2004) 68.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Wagner, Leading Your Church to Growth (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984) 44.

<sup>5</sup> George Barna, "Awareness of Spiritual Gifts is Changing," The Barna Update, Feb. 5, 2001: The Barna Group, <<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?>>.

<sup>6</sup> Andy Stanley, From Foyer To Kitchen: The North Point Strategy, DVD (Alpharetta, GA: North Point Ministries Inc., 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Andy Stanley, Making Vision Stick, 34.

<sup>8</sup> John Piper, "How To Kill Sin," Preaching Today Audio Issue 293, CD (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today Inc., 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Ortberg, "The Jekyll and Hyde of Motherhood," Preaching Today Audio Issue 176, magnetic tape, (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc., 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Bryan Chapell, "Killing the Red Lizard," Preaching Today Audio Issue 264, magnetic tape (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, Inc., 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Joe Stowell, "The Muchness of God," Preaching Today Audio Issue 255, magnetic tape (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today Inc., 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Rob Bell, "Flame," Nooma 002 CD (Grand Rapids: Fringe, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Walter Bruggemann, Finally Comes the Poet (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 84, emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Michael J. Easley, workshop , Preaching Today Audio Issue 293, CD (Carol Stream, IL: Preaching Today Inc., 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Haddon Robinson, Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 21.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Gibson, "Introduction," in Preaching to a Shifting Culture , ed. Scott Gibson (Grand

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Rapids: Baker Books, 2004) 12.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Arthurs, “The Postmodern Mind and Preaching,” in Preaching to a Shifting Culture, ed. Scott Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004) 193-197.

<sup>18</sup> Scott Gibson, “Preaching in an Anti-authority Age,” in Preaching to a Shifting Culture, ed. Scott Gibson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004) 224-225.

<sup>19</sup> Natasha Bedingfield, “Unwritten” rec. August 2, 2005, Unwritten, Epic Records, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Barna, “Awareness of Spiritual Gifts is Changing.”

<sup>21</sup> Skye Jethani, “Glimpses of Glory,” Leadership Journal 28. 3 (2007) 43-44.

## **APPENDIX A: A SERMON FOR MISSION ADVANCEMENT**

### **“THE CIRCLE OF LOVE”**

Preached at Grace Chapel, Lexington, MA on September 18, 2005

#### **The Search for Community**

A few years ago the Boston Globe carried the story of a 70-something year old woman named Adele, who lived for many years in a quiet neighborhood in Worcester. One summer, when Adele's grass grew waist high, the neighbors decided it was unsightly and paid a local boy to mow it down. The following winter, when Adele's pipes froze and burst, someone called the utility company and had the water turned off. When the mail began spilling out the front door, the post office stopped delivering the mail. The one thing no one did was check to see if Adele was all right. She wasn't. When police finally broke down the front door of her little blue house, they found the woman's skeletal remains. She'd been dead for years, and nobody had noticed.

As unsettling as that story is, it turns out that in America, more and more people are living, and dying, alone. Society is more fragmented, families are more disconnected, and neighbors are more isolated than ever before. The pace of life is faster, the fear of strangers is greater, relational dysfunction is more widespread. One of Adele's neighbors, Eileen, offered this explanation for what happened, “It's not a very friendly neighborhood. I'm as much to blame as anyone. She was alone and needed someone to talk to, but I was working two jobs and was sick of her coming over at all hours, so I stopped answering the door.”

But the yearning for connection is still there. It shows up in on-line journals, where individuals spill their guts and tell their stories to anyone who's willing to read

them. It shows up in recreational bowling leagues, which I hear are making a comeback nearly 20 years after Robert Putnam wrote *Bowling Alone*. But mostly it's showing up in people's return to church. *US News and World Report* tells us that religious congregations are the strongest single force bringing isolated, solitary individuals into community with one another; more than any cultural, athletic, or entertainment activity.

A few weeks ago the *Globe* carried a story about the Granite State Baptist Church in Salem, NH. The church is 30 years old, but in the past 9 years it's grown from 70 people to about 700. The reason, according to Pastor Anthony Milas, is that "people are going to churches where they can be loved; they want to be somewhere where they can be transparent, authentic, and vulnerable. God wired people for relationships."

This search for community may have a 21<sup>st</sup> century look, but it's not new. It's been around ever since God looked at Adam and said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." And human beings have struggled with community ever since Adam's son Cain slew his brother Abel out of jealousy.

This yearning for community, and the difficulty of attaining it, is what prompted Jesus to fall to his knees on the night before his death, and pray to his Father in heaven, "make them one, Father, even as we are one."

Last Sunday we shared our vision for the year here at Grace Chapel – that we would become a Community of communities; that God would bring us into such authentic relationships with Himself and one another, that people will be drawn to our life together, and become one with us, as well. We're calling it, The Power of ONE – which we described as the focus of a laser beam, the strength of a braided rope, the synergy of a championship football team.



We gave you a bracelet as symbol of that unity, and a reminder to pray for and pursue community this year. I bumped into a woman in the parking lot after our Mom-to-Mom program on Thursday. She introduced herself and her young daughter, who was twirling her umbrella in the rain and showing off the blue bracelet around her wrist. The mom told me her daughter hadn't taken it off since last Sunday, except to take a bath. And that as soon as she steps out of the tub she immediately asks, "Where's my ONE bracelet?" I can't remember now if the mom was wearing hers???

That vision for one-ness springs from the heart and mind of God, as revealed in Jesus' prayer, recorded in John 17. We took our first look at that prayer last week and learned that unity begins with Christ. We discover the power of ONE when individually and collectively we come to know Christ as Savior and Lord. The more of us who know Him, and the deeper we know Him, the stronger and more vibrant our community will be. So that's our first prayer and goal for the year; that we would more fully become one in Christ. That's what we mean by One Lord.

But that's just the beginning. If we're really going to experience the community Jesus is describing, we have to become one with each other, as well. That's what we mean by One Church. So let's turn once again to John 17. We won't read the whole prayer again. Let's pick it up in the third section, beginning at John 17:20.

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity

to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them, and that I myself may be in them” (John 17:20-26).

### **One with Each Other**

We learned last week that community is unity made visible. Unity is easy in the abstract; in the real world, it’s another story. So Jesus isn’t satisfied when we’re simply one with Him, even though that’s where true community begins. He wants us to be one with each other; living in community at street level. But what does that look like? What did Jesus have in mind for us when he prayed that prayer?

In some churches unity means a once-a-month pot-luck dinner. In some churches, unity means everyone wears the same denominational label. In some churches, unity means everyone worships the same way, uses the same translation of the Bible, and wears the same kinds of clothes on Sunday. In some churches, unity means everyone agrees with the pastor. (That’s not the case here!?!?) What did Jesus have in mind?

Well, he gives us a clue when he prays in John 17:21, “may they be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” He says it again in John 17:22, “may they be one as we are one.” And again in John 17:26, “that the love you have for me may be in

them, and that I myself may be in them.” Do you hear what he’s praying? He’s praying that our relationships with each other, in the church, should be something like his relationship with his Heavenly Father. That our earthly communities should be a reflection, or even an extension, of the divine community called the Trinity. Well, that explains everything, doesn’t it?!?!

### **The Circle of Love**

This prayer leads us to one of the most intriguing of all Christian doctrines – the doctrine of the Tri-unity of God. We believe in one God, existing eternally in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each one is fully God, and together they are fully God. Take one of them away, and God would cease to exist.

While the word “trinity” does not appear in the Scripture, it is a concept that is revealed in the Scripture from beginning to end. In Genesis 1:1, we meet God the Father: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” In 1:2 we meet God the Spirit: “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” In 1:3 we meet God the Son, when we read that God spoke the word, and there was light. That Word is identified later in Scripture as God the Son. In the first three verses of the Bible we find all three members of the Godhead, acting distinctly and yet cooperatively. And lest there be any doubt about that later in that same chapter God says, “Let us make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26). And so it goes throughout the Bible. God is one, but God is not alone. God exists in eternal community with Himself.

That doctrine was articulated by church fathers and creeds in the first centuries of the church. But down through the history human beings have struggled to understand it; to make sense of it in everyday language and pictures. (Some of those pictures are really

bad: The three stages of water? The three parts of an egg?) In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, a Greek theologian named John of Damascus described the relationships in the Trinity as “a circle dance.” You know how Greeks dance – in a circle. Holding hands, facing each other, following each other one way and then another. That was a new thought. Commonly the church pictured the Trinity as a triangle – three sides, each one in relationship with the other two. That’s not bad, but a triangle is static, angular, hard. John felt that a circle better captured the movement, warmth, and one-ness of the Godhead.

700 years later, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a Russian artist named Andrei Rublev came along and developed that idea further in one of the most famous and revered icons of all time – The Old Testament Trinity. It’s such a fascinating and revealing work I’d like to show it to you for a few minutes up on the screens. The painting is based upon a story in Genesis 18, when three angelic beings come to visit Abraham, and have dinner with him outside his tent. Rublev seized upon that scene to portray the nature of relationships in the Godhead.

Notice a few things. Notice that the three are seated in a circular fashion, rather than a triangle. That’s especially clear when you look at the base of the table, in which the corners are rounded off. It’s also evident in the use of curved lines to portray to characters and their relationships to one another, giving a feeling of easy movement, or flow, from one to the other to the other. Secondly, notice the communal meal around which they are gathered, signaling fellowship and intimacy and joy. And third notice the relative equality of the three figures in size and stature. In fact, observers are not really certain which of the three are the Father and the Son. Typically in such paintings the one in the center, and slightly higher, would represent God the Father. And that may be the

case here. But here the two figures on the right and center have their heads tilted, bowed almost, toward the figure on the left, as if deferring to Him. And the blue and crimson of the center figure were often used to represent God the Son. Whatever Rublev had in mind, his interpretation suggests that the relationships between these three Persons are based on love, not power; that the genius of the Trinity is not hierarchy, but intimacy.

And so we might accurately describe the Trinity as a “circle of love.” A pastor and author named George Cladis, who first called my attention to this icon, points out that, “In a circle we can see each other. No one is left out. We are interconnected. We hold each other up.” The circle is a symbol of perfect one-ness, which is why a bride and groom exchange wedding rings. Don’t miss the fact that this bracelet your wearing is in the form of a circle.

This circle of love is what Jesus had in mind for us when he prayed, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21). He wants us to experience the same kind of community with each other that he experiences in the divine community. And what do we learn about that relationship from this passage? We learn that the Father and Son enjoy each other; they take delight in one another’s character and work, and they want to be together. “And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:5). The Father and Son know each other, intimately and accurately. “Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you” (John 17:25). This is that relational, experiential knowing we spoke about last week. The Father and Son share with each other. “All I have is yours, all you have is mine” (John 17:10).

Power, authority, glory. There's no holding back here; nothing hidden. The Father and Son depend on each other; they cooperate with one another to accomplish the divine purpose. The Father granted the Son authority over all people, and the Son exercised that authority by giving eternal life to those the Father had decreed. The Father and Son lift each other up, as we read in John 17:1, "Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you." It is the will of each member of the Godhead that the other's greatness would be known. And we know from the rest of Scripture that what is true of the Father and Son is also true of the Holy Spirit.

So, within the community of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit enjoy each other, know each other, depend on each other, and lift each other up. And Jesus wants us to experience that same quality of relationship with each other.

He wants us to enjoy each other; to take delight in one another's unique personalities, to be eager to be together and to enjoy time together around a table. He wants us to know each other; really know each other – accurately and intimately. He wants us to know the circumstances of our lives; our challenges and opportunities; our life experiences and personal needs. He wants us to share with each other – share homes, share food, share information, share joys and sorrows, share life! He wants us to depend on each other; to look to one another for wisdom, and support, and strength, and help. He wants us to lift each other up; to enable one another to be the glorious people we were created to be, the Christ-followers we would like to be. And he wants us to enjoy those things not only in relationship with each other, but with Him at the very same time, in one great circle of love. What a remarkable invitation. Who wouldn't want to belong to a community like that!?!?

## **Where Are You Finding Community?**

But now let me ask you a very practical question. When, and where, and with whom, are you going to experience this kind of community? It's a wonderful concept, it looks very inviting up on the screen, but how do you and I enter into this kind of experience? You see, God can enjoy community by Himself, because He is triune. But we're not. We need other people to experience this kind of one-ness. But how? Where?

I can tell you this; you won't find it on Sunday morning, in a worship service like this. Now, I'm not being critical of what we do here on Sunday morning, and it's true that we enjoy a certain degree of community here when we gather for worship. We greet each other, we see some people we know, we sing songs together, we share resources with each other when the offering plate comes around. We even sit in a sort of semi-circle. There's a certain kind of one-ness when we gather like this – more than in many churches, I'm sure.

But it's not this kind of community, is it, the kind we've been describing this morning? In a 65 minute service with upwards of a thousand people, we can't enjoy the kind of intimacy, the easy laughter, the deep conversation, the connectedness modeled by the Trinity. Much as you might like to bring your Starbucks into the sanctuary with you, it's not a good idea! If we're going to experience the kind of one-ness Jesus is praying for, we're going to have to find a smaller group of people, where we can sit in a circle, and see each other, and hold each other up. .

Let me take you back to the story of Adele, who was dead for years before anyone noticed. I hope none of us are that alone in the world. But let me ask you a related question. If you missed church for a week, or two or three, would anyone notice? If you

suddenly landed in the hospital this week, would someone from church show up to visit? If your marriage was in trouble, is there someone from church you could call to talk to? If you began to drift from the faith, would anyone at church be able to tell, would they have the love and courage to call you on it? If you answered “no” to some of those questions, then you are really not “in community.”

Now, you could blame the church. “That’s the problem with those big churches; you really don’t get to know anybody.” But the truth is getting to know people can be a problem in just about any size church. Once a church gets larger than about 60 or 70 people this kind of community can’t happen naturally. A church has to come up with structures and ministries that help people find community. It can happen for a while in Sunday School class, or a women’s or men’s group, but if a church continues to grow those groups will soon be too large, as well. So, growing churches have discovered that groups are the most effective way to provide authentic community experiences for people. I’m thinking of that church in New Hampshire that’s seen some remarkable growth over the past decade. As they’ve grown they’ve had to come with new and effective means of providing community for the people who come seeking it. The pastor says, “Eight years ago we had six Sunday School classes. Now we have 60 Home Groups, so that every night of the week, we’ve got people eating dinner together, praying together, and studying the Bible together.”

For years we’ve had a vibrant small group ministry here at Grace. In recent years we called them GRACE Groups. For the past year or so we have been piloting a new approach to our group ministry. Something we’re calling LIFE Communities. They’re a little larger than a typical small group – about 15-25 people – to create a little more



energy and possibility for connection. They meet twice a month, not just for Bible study and prayer, but to share a meal together, worship, serve and care for each other, and reach out together to their community or the world in some way. The idea is that these communities become microcosms of the larger church, incorporating all of the Core Values of worship, community, discipleship, service, and evangelism.

Bill Donahue is a specialist in small group ministry with the WCA, and he's observed a shift in the ministry of groups in recent years from being "places of study" to "laboratories for life." He says, "There's a hunger, and a need, to process life, not just Biblical content; to connect truth with life."

For the past couple of years Karen and I have been in a group like that. We haven't called ourselves a LIFE Community, but it feels like that's what we're becoming. There are about 14 of us; married and single; younger and older, with kids and without. Over the past year or so, we have celebrated the birth of a young couple's first child, we've supported each other on missions trips, we've had social evenings and pool parties. We've prayed for each other through job transitions, and health crises, and parenting challenges, and caring for aging parents. Last winter we had some frank and practical conversations about stewardship of money and time. We've driven each other to the airport, we've helped each other move. Mostly what we do is sit in a circle twice a month, and share the journey of life and faith together. It's become a very important feature of our lives personally and spiritually. It's become our community within the community here at Grace. I want everyone here at Grace to have that kind of experience.

I mentioned last week the joy I had in praying through the church directory - putting names and faces together, bringing people before the Lord. But I have to tell you

I was amazed at how many people I didn't know, and by how many people I knew but hadn't talked to in a while. I found myself asking, "Who does know these people? Where are they connected? Is anyone caring for them? Does anyone know what's happening in their lives?" I was burdened by that as I prayed. That's when it hit me that the only way people will be known and cared for in that way, is if they are involved with a smaller community here at Grace.

That's what's driving our vision for community this year – that we would become a Community of communities. It's nice to have people's names and faces contained in a directory; but that doesn't make us one. It's nice to have a banner and a theme and a bracelet, but that doesn't make us one either. But we won't experience the power of ONE until we truly become one with each other – enjoying each other, knowing each other, depending on each other, lifting each other to become the people and the church God calls us to be. That can only happen, when we enter into authentic community with a smaller group of people, and begin to share life together.

WE already have 30+ LIFE Communities up and running. Some of our other small groups are moving in that direction, and this year we hope to begin many new ones. In two weeks, on Oct 2, you'll have an opportunity to learn more about our LIFE Communities, and to find one that might work for you.

### **Room for One More?**

I'd like to show you one more thing about that icon, the Old Testament Trinity. I'd like you to notice this open space in the foreground, between these two members of the Godhead. Notice that the space between them is larger than the others, as if they're making room for someone else. You know who that space is for? You. Rublev has

situated these three around the table in such a way that the viewer is invited into the space, into the community, into the circle of love. That's not just an artist's fancy. That's what Jesus prayed for on his final night before going to the cross. "I pray for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).

If you have not taken your place in a community like this, I invite you, I urge you, to consider doing so this year. Take the next couple of weeks and think about it, pray about it, talk about it with your spouse or a friend. I'm not prepared to say that it's God's will for you to join a LIFE Community; that would be presumptuous. But I am prepared to say, based on this conversation between Jesus and His Father, that it is God's will for you to be in community – one with Him, and one with each other. Where will you experience that this year?

If you already belong to such a community, whatever you call it, I invite you this year to consider making room in your circle for someone else. That's not always an easy thing to do when you've been together for a while, when you've got a good thing going. What if the group gets too big? What if they don't fit in? What if they sit in my favorite chair? Those are natural questions. Our group has asked those questions.

But now, consider this. The Father, Son, and Spirit had a perfect small group going. They'd been together from all eternity. They enjoyed intimacy and accountability. What if they had decided that what they had together was so precious, so fragile, that they decided not to open it up to anyone else, especially not to mortal men and women? Where would we be then? If the Holy Trinity, the divine community, could

make room for the likes of you and me, how can we do anything less for those who are seeking a circle of love?

## APPENDIX B: A SERMON FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

### “UNBREAKABLE”

Preached at Grace Chapel, Lexington, MA on November 4, 2006

#### **Unbreakable?**

M. Night Shyamalan’s film, “Unbreakable,” begins with a train wreck. Everyone on board is killed – 100+ people – except for one. David Dunn not only survives the wreck, he doesn’t have a scratch on him. Instead of being relieved by his good fortune, he’s troubled by this remarkable yet disturbing outcome. Why was he unharmed, and what does it mean?

Along comes an eccentric comic book collector named Elijah, who seems equally intrigued by Dunn’s survival. Elijah has reason to be interested. He was born with a genetic disorder that leaves his bones especially brittle. So brittle, in fact, that as a child the kids called him, “Mr. Glass,” because his bones broke so easily. Dunn, on the other hand, has never broken a bone, even after years of playing football. He’s never had stitches, never pulled a muscle, never been bruised, and never even been sick; not once in his whole life. Elijah tells David that he’s not like other people; he’s been given an extraordinary gift; a gift that he cannot just keep to himself, but must employ in the service and protection of others. For the rest of the film, Dunn struggles to understand and accept his remarkable abilities, and the destiny that goes with them. I’m not recommending the film; it moves slowly and becomes unnecessarily dark and violent at one point. But the title, and the concept, are intriguing: *unbreakable*.

The film is fiction, of course. A comic book fantasy. There are no superheroes walking the streets of our cities. We are all quite breakable. Anyone here who hasn’t

broken a bone? Or gotten stitches? Or come down with a cold or flu or something worse? My son's college campus has been hit with an outbreak of mumps. 80-something students have been quarantined with the disease, in spite of the fact that they'd all been vaccinated. We're a lot more like Mr. Glass than David Dunn – we're fragile. Disease, accident, injury. Violence, germs, natural disaster. There's no escape. All kinds of things can happen to us in this world, and when they do they lead to all sorts of questions. Why did this happen, and why to me, or to my loved one? Who, or what, is behind all this? How am I supposed to handle it?

We've recently been challenged by Jesus to reach out to others as we make our way through this world, but the world can be a dangerous place. How can we afford to reach out when it takes all we have just to stay healthy and safe?

With these things in mind I'd like to spend the next 5 weeks exploring one of the most intriguing books of the New Testament – 2 Corinthians. It's a letter written by the apostle Paul, after surviving more than a few train wrecks in his life and ministry. It's one of the least familiar of Paul's letters, but it speaks to the harsh realities of life, and to the unbreakable faith that sustains us through difficult and dangerous times. Let's begin with what I believe is the pivotal passage of the whole book: 2 Corinthians 4:7-12:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being

given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

### **Jars of Clay**

This letter is probably the fourth in a series of letters written by Paul to the church in Corinth, with 1 Corinthians being the 2<sup>nd</sup> letter. It was written after a season of hardship and suffering in Paul's life, so severe that he and his companions had nearly died. We don't know the particulars of that episode, but later on in this letter, Paul catalogues some of the difficulties he has encountered during his ministry:

I have...been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles,...and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst...I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:23b-28).

How would you like to go on a mission trip with Paul?!?! I guess Paul is qualified to speak on the subject of hardship.

As if all that wasn't bad enough, now some of his critics in Corinth are kicking him while he's down; suggesting that he lacks the credentials to be an apostle, and that all these bad things that have happened to him are only further evidence that the blessing of

God is not on his ministry. In response to all this, Paul writes this letter, both to establish his credibility as an apostle, and to teach the Corinthians a proper perspective on hardship and suffering, a perspective we very much need today in the American church. Let's look at his words a little more closely.

“We have this treasure in jars of clay...” (2 Corinthians 4:7a). The “we” he’s talking about includes not only himself and his associates, but by extension everyone who bears the name of Christ in this world. So he’s thinking of his readers, and even of us.

The “treasure” he’s talking about here is the gospel; not just the message itself – the life and death and resurrection of Jesus – but the power behind the message; the very life of God, now available through faith in Christ. That’s the treasure – the life-giving power of Christ.

“We have this treasure in jars of clay.” Some translations read, “clay pots,” others, “earthenware vessels.” Clay pottery was the most common material for cookware, dishes, washbasins, and for storing food and liquid. Clay pots kept liquid cool and slowed the evaporation process. Clay was easy to obtain and easy to work with, so if a pot broke, it was no big deal. You could make or buy another one cheaply and easily. Sometimes people would store their valuables in jars of clay. The idea was that nobody would think of looking in something so ordinary to find anything of value. If you’ve ever stuck cash in sock drawer, you get the idea. (Of course, every burglar now knows the sock drawer is the first place to look!)

So how it is that Paul and the rest of us are like jars of clay? First of all, jars of clay were quite ordinary. Clay pots were perhaps the most common objects of the day. They were everywhere, especially in the homes of peasants and common people. Wealthy



people used more exotic materials - ivory, marble, glass, and fine wood. But regular people used clay pots. It would be like saying today, “we have this treasure in plastic bags.” We use plastic bags for groceries, and garbage. Why would God put his treasure in something so ordinary?

Secondly, it’s interesting because jars of clay were fragile. Clay was cheap and easy to work with, but compared to marble or ivory or even wood, it didn’t last. No one really expected it too. You would use the pot for a while, and when it got too chipped or cracked to use, or when it fell and shattered, you didn’t lose any sleep over it. You just got another one.

And so you have this odd juxtaposition: God has taken this great treasure – the life of Christ – and placed it in people like you and me, who are as common and fragile as clay pots.

I came across a true story about a thrifty woman who hated to throw anything away. So she made a habit of re-using old containers – Styrofoam cups, coffee cans, etc. – to store things around the house. She filled them with sugar or flour or paper clips or other household items. She even took to using cardboard take-out boxes, the kind you get from Chinese restaurants, to store her jewelry. Not just her everyday, costume jewelry, but the \$15,000 necklace her husband had given her on their 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary!

That’s odd, we say to ourselves. It doesn’t make any sense. Why would you place something so valuable in a container that’s so ordinary. Why would God entrust His treasure to jars of clay? Well, two reasons, according to Paul.

**To Display His Life-giving Power**

First, to display His life-giving power. 2 Corinthians 4:7 continues, “to show that this all-surpassing power is from God, and not from us.” God places His life within ordinary, fragile people so that it’s plain that whatever they accomplish is only by His power.

From the little bit we know from the Scripture, Paul was not an impressive person. He was not known as an eloquent speaker; he may have been small of stature; he seems to have had health problems, poor eyesight, perhaps. And as we’ve seen he was often on the receiving end of criticism, slander, rejection, and persecution. And yet somehow through him the gospel went out and the church was established throughout the known world. The only explanation was that God must have been working through him!

You see, it doesn’t make sense to place something so valuable in a container that’s so ordinary, unless, of course, you want people to notice the treasure, and not the container.

Let’s say you’re having guests for dinner, and you decide to make your specialty – chicken cacciatore. It’s a family recipe – takes all day to prepare, but these guests are important so you’re happy to do it. When it comes time for dinner, you bring in the main dish, set it down in the middle of the table, and your guests exclaim, “Oh my, look at that. What a beautiful serving bowl!” Then they spend the rest of the meal admiring the dish – “Where did you get that bowl? How long have you had it?” – and never say a word about the chicken! That would be a shame. Next time you’d serve it up in a disposable foil tray, so the container wouldn’t attract any attention at all.

So it is that God pours His life into ordinary containers, like you and me, so that people will praise Him, and not us. So that it becomes obvious that we are who we are

only because of the treasure we carry within us – the life-giving power of Christ. And the harder life gets, the more conspicuous the treasure becomes.

Paul goes on to describe four kinds of hardship. Chances are everyone here can identify with one of them.

He says, “we are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed” (2 Corinthians 4:8a). We might say, he was stressed out. We know what he means. Have you ever slumped through the day as if you had the weight of the world on your shoulders? When you lay down at night does it feel like you’ve got a sandbag sitting on your chest. Paul was hard pressed, but he didn’t give in.

“We’re perplexed, but not in despair” (2 Corinthians 4:8b). In other words, we’re confused; bewildered; mixed up. We don’t know what to do. Have you ever been so overwhelmed by the complexities of life, or by some difficult decision, you were completely immobilized? Like you want to just close your eyes and make it all go away? Paul was perplexed, but he didn’t give up.

“We’re persecuted, but not abandoned” (2 Corinthians 4:9a). Jews, Romans, false teachers, fellow Christians – they were piling on Paul, criticizing and hounding him everywhere he went. Do you ever feel picked on; as though everyone’s out to make your life difficult - friends, family, your boss, the school, the court system? Paul was persecuted, but he hung in there.

“We’re struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:9b). Literally and emotionally, Paul’s been knocked off his feet again and again. Maybe you know how that feels – one setback or defeat after another. Financial trouble. Health problems. Lost

job. Family strife. You're not sure how much you can take anymore. Paul was struck down, but he kept getting up again.

Stressed out. Mixed up. Picked on. Knocked down. Any of those apply to you these days? They all applied to Paul, every one of them, and all at the same time. Talk about a train wreck! And yet, he was still standing. Paul and his companions were like a Bill Bellichek defense – they would bend, but not break. The world has done it's worst to us, but we're still standing, still following, still reaching. Not because of who we are. We're just a bunch of clay pots. But because of who God is, and the life-giving power He's placed within us. That power is never as conspicuous as when we're going through hard times.

That's a very important lesson for the American church today. You don't have to look very hard these days to find a preacher or Bible teacher telling you that God wants you to be healthy and wealthy and happy. Listen to Christian radio for a while, watch some of the Christian cable broadcasts, surf the net, and you will find people telling you that God wants to bless you with success, with prosperity, and with a long and lovely life. That's not a new teaching. There were teachers in Corinth saying many of the same things. In fact, they were calling into question Paul's ministry and message because of the hard things that had happened to him: "Why would you want to listen to a guy like that? He gets stoned, shipwrecked, run out of town. He doesn't even have his own talk show!"

Paul's unusual resume reminds us that God never promised us immunity from the hurts and hardships of life. If anything, following Christ makes things more complicated, and leaves us more vulnerable to hostility and heartache. The most obvious evidence of

the presence of God in our lives isn't that we escape hardship, it's that we endure hardship.

If you're feeling hard pressed, perplexed, picked on, or knocked down – it doesn't mean you're doing something wrong, or that you're outside of God's will. On the contrary, it probably means you're right where you're supposed to be. It's not that God takes pleasure in our hardship, or that He afflicts us with pain to see how we handle it. It's just that in this crash-bang world we live in, every time we get knocked around but don't break, we show the world that we have something special inside us – the life of Christ. And as long as that's true, we're unbreakable. God places His treasure in jars of clay to display his life-giving power.

### **To Dispense His Life-giving Power**

But there's a second reason He does that. God puts His treasure in jars of clay to dispense His life-giving power. Let's look again at 2 Corinthians 4:10-12:

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Jars of clay were meant to be used, not to be admired. We have a sterling silver tea set at home. It was given to us by a family member in another part of the country who wanted us to have it as a reminder of their love for us. It's quite old, and beautifully made, even has a "W" etched into it. It sits on a stand in our dining room, an arms reach from the table. There's only one problem. We can't use it. Before they gave it to us

they had it chemically-coated so that it wouldn't tarnish. If you put hot water in it will ruin the finish and the tea.

God's not looking for sterling silver tea sets. He's looking for rough-and-tumble clay pots. The kind that can be used everyday. The kind of pots that don't need to be tucked away in a china closet, but can be sent out into a crash-bang world, carrying within them the life of Christ. The church was never meant to be a china cabinet, where precious pieces could be safely stowed out of harms way. The church was meant to be a working kitchen, where well-worn pots are filled again and again to dispense their life-giving contents to a thirsty world.

“For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body” (2 Corinthians 4:11). That's a very interesting choice of words on Paul's part – “given over to death.” It's the same expression the gospels use to describe Jesus being “given over” to the authorities for flogging and crucifixion. In the same way that God allowed His Son to suffer for the sins of the world, He sometimes allows His servants to suffer in order to offer everlasting life to the world.

Let me illustrate what I mean with this well-worn, larger-than-life-sized jar of clay we have on the platform. Let's imagine for a moment that this jar is filled with fine wine – sparkling, robust, fragrant – whatever words you use to describe wine. Let's say that this jar of clay goes out into the world and gets knocked around a bit, and gets a crack. What's going to happen all along that crack? The wine is going to seep through, isn't it? You'll see it, the length of the crack. Let's say it gets roughed up a bit more and actually falls over on its side, what's going to spill out? Wine. People will rush over and

fill their glasses with it. Suppose someone gets out of control and picks up this jar of clay and turns it upside down, what's going to come pouring out? Wine – gallons and gallons of it, and the fragrance of it will fill the room.

Now, let's say this jar of clay is a person, filled with the life of Christ, and it gets bumped or tipped over or turned upside down, what's going to come out? Christ. What will people see, and smell, and taste? Christ. And because that jar is unbreakable, it can be filled up and knocked over again and again and again, and every time, the life-giving power of Christ will flow to more and more and more people.

And so when a believer loses his job in a bad economy, but responds with trust and perseverance, it's the life of Christ seeping through. When a Christ-follower finds herself flat on her back in a hospital bed, uncomfortable and uncertain, yet blesses those around her with grace and faith, it's the life of Christ spilling out. When you attend a Christian funeral, and the people celebrate the person's life and sing of the joys of heaven, that's the everlasting life of Christ filling the room with its fragrance.

Maybe you're feeling stressed out this morning; or mixed up, picked on, or knocked down. It's not at all uncommon in this world in which we live. But know this; if you have Christ within you, you're unbreakable.

Before I finish, we'd like to share with you the story of a couple of clay pots from this congregation who experienced some of the worst the world has to offer, but displayed and dispensed the life-giving power of Christ.

(VIDEO Faith Story)

That's why God puts his treasure in jars of clay, to display and dispense the life-giving power of Christ.

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